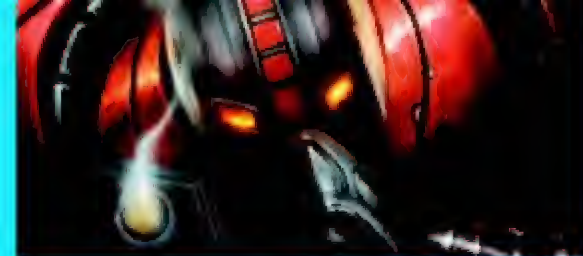


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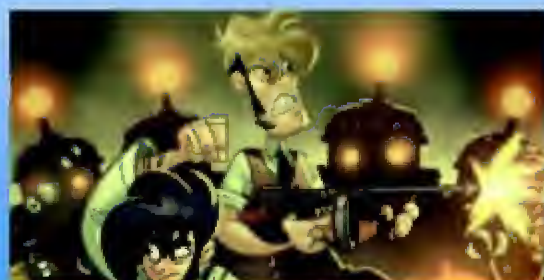
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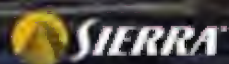
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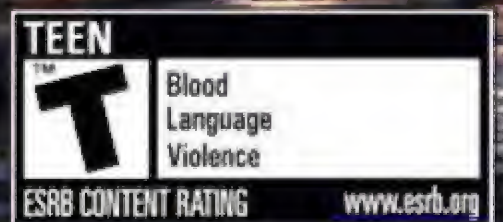
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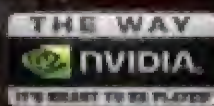
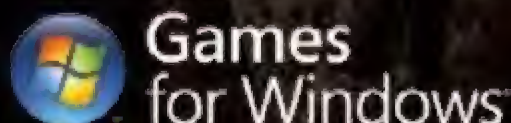
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This month: A veritable bevy of infotainment



DEPARTMENTS

16 Editorial

World of WarCraft is on our cover again. If you don't like it, this gnome warlock will Banish your ass. LOL!

20 Letters

More missives scrawled in crayon and blood from our dedicated fan base. We tremble.

22 Start

This month we delve into the history of cheating in games and the ups and downs of licensed MMOs. Plus: more juicy details on *Unreal Tournament 3* and *StarCraft II*, and a first look at *Supreme Commander* architect Chris Taylor's next big action-RPG, *Space Siege*.

COVER STORY

56 World of WarCraft: Wrath of the Lich King

Yeah, that's right: You're not done leveling yet, bub. So get your tush back from Outland and join us as we pursue Arthas himself up in the snowy (but not too snowy) continent of Northrend.



STARCRRAFT II 28



UNREAL TOURNAMENT 3 36



PENNY ARCADE 42



LEGENDARY 54



BIO SHOCK

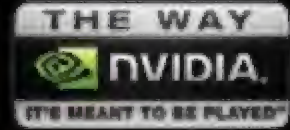
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82 **Extend**

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102 **Greenspeak**

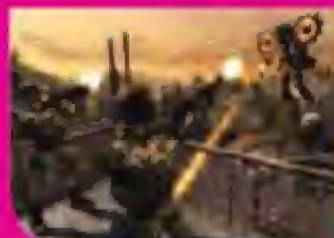
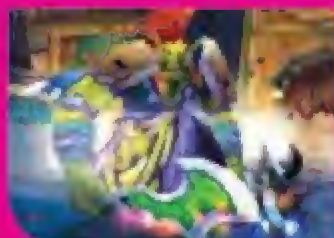
The repo man has come for *Auto Assault*. One editor cries into his plate o' shrimp.

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THIS MONTH ON GFW10.1UP.COM

Get more WOW info straight from the floor of BlizzCon. Plus: more details and video on *StarCraft II* and more words of wisdom from Splash Damage's Paul Wedgwood.



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LFG TO NORTHREND

The world's biggest game just got even bigger



Hey, look—*World of Warcraft* is on our cover! Again! Yeah, yeah—I know. We've done this before. Er, five times, in fact, over the past four years. But, look, before you start composing that angry e-mail to me ("RITE ABOUT SOME OTHER GAMES 4 ONCE NOT JUST WOW U GUYZ SUK"), let me just say that putting *World of Warcraft* on the cover of a PC gaming magazine is not unlike putting Brad Pitt or Jessica Alba on the cover of *People* magazine: There's a great chance that a huge majority of the people you're trying to sell magazines to are going to be interested in that particular cover story. As much as we all like to champion and root for the little guy (I swear, I'm gonna get to that *Sacred 2* preview one of these days), it really doesn't do anyone much good to ignore the monster with the 9 million subscribers.

Anyway, we're talking about the new *WOW* expansion here! Come on. Do not ask us to not get our Alliance Underoos in a bunch when the news is this big. And, as we learned when Blizzard announced the expansion at BlizzCon on August 3, *Wrath of the Lich King* is big indeed: a new continent, new class, new profession...and, well, hey, managing editor Sean Molloy didn't type his fingers into bloody nubs writing the story just for me to ruin it all here, so go read that instead. Actually, Mr. Molloy handily earns this month's MVP award with a hands-on preview of Blizzard's other big game, *StarCraft II*, if Elves and Gnomes are not your thing. (And if they're not, don't expect me to go out with you.)

While I'm in article-pimp mode, let me further direct your attention to a couple of other fine stories in this publication: Ed Halter's detailed history of cheating in games (pg. 24) and Julian Murdoch's thought-provoking piece on the pros and cons of licensed MMOs (pg. 46). Read, learn, and live, my friends. That's what we're here for at *GFW*. To educate you. To enlighten you. To take that measly \$4.99 out of your pocket and turn you into a veritable fount of gaming wisdom.

And if reading our words is not enough, you can bask in the glorious, mellifluous sound of our golden voices, which some have understandably likened to hearing angels sing, on our weekly *GFW Radio* podcast at podcasts.1UP.com or the iTunes Music Store. It's like a little bit of heaven, right here on Earth.

Jeff Green

Editor-in-Chief

Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

Now Playing: *World of Warcraft*, *F.E.A.R.*, *Pokémon Pearl* (Nintendo DS)
 1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff.1UP.com

MEET THE STAFF



SEAN MOLLOY
 MANAGING EDITOR
 Try looking into that place where you dare not look! You'll find me there, staring out at you!

Now Playing: *WarCraft III*, *Tabula Rasa* (beta), *World of Warcraft*
 1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com



DARREN GLADSTONE
 SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)
 Across, six letters.
 Bag with a steady stream.

Now Playing: *Rose vs. Camilla* (Web game), *Medal of Honor: Airborne*, *Overlord* (still!)
 1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com



RYAN SCOTT
 EDITOR (REVIEWS/EXTEND)
 Ryan gives this staff-box entry a solid 9 out of 10.

Now Playing: *Pirates of the Burning Sea* (beta)
 1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com



SHAWN ELLIOTT
 EDITOR (START)
 I have no patience left, and as a physician or doctor, it puts me in an awkward position. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZIK2llqmzpq>

Now Playing: *Tabula Rasa* (beta), *Medal of Honor: Airborne*
 1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com



MICHAEL JENNINGS
 ART DIRECTOR
 Gone surfing.

Now Playing: *DiRT*
 1UP.com Blog: GFWMichael.1UP.com



ROSEMARY PINKHAM
 JUNIOR DESIGNER
 After spending an estimated 2,159,483 hours on this month's *GFW* interview art, Rosie is now haunted by recurring nightmares of Paul Wedgwood's face. No offense, Paul.

Now Playing: *Does Photoshop count?*
 1UP.com Blog: GFWRosie.1UP.com

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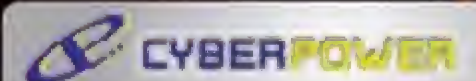
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Letters

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LETTER OF THE MONTH

THIS MEANS WAR?

First of all, I would like to applaud Shawn Elliott on not taking the easy way out on his *Gears of War* cover story (GFW #9, pg. 53). No technical specs or explanations on lighting effects: Instead, he concentrated on lead designer Cliff Bleszinski's motivation and inspiration for important aspects of the game.

As much as I enjoyed the article's direction, I left from it thinking that Shawn's memory of the game has improved since its Xbox 360 exclusivity was announced to expire. When praise was being heaped on *Gears*, Shawn was there, trying to put the game in its place. On podcasts with EGM editor-in-chief Dan Hsu, who gave *Gears* a 10, Shawn expressed his [distaste for the] need to think like a bad level designer to get through portions of the game, that the need to clear every enemy from a stage before progressing the story, for instance, was antiquated design. But interestingly enough, none of this criticism is in the article.

I guess that, at times for cover stories, GFW needs to put the rose-colored sunglasses on and leave its criticism for reviews. Better yet, maybe memories improve when hearing that a game that people felt never belonged exclusively on a console is finally coming to PC. It's always fun to knock a console shooter, right? Or maybe it's the simplest of answers: *Gears* is a really great game and Shawn's opinions changed as he played it more.

Kris Jonson

Shawn Elliott responds: "I'm happy you're holding me to it, Kris. Matter of fact, I did question everyone I spoke to at Epic about the very issues I addressed in the EGM Live podcast (transcripts of Epic interviews available at GFW09.1UP.com). Even on that program, though, I explained that I enjoyed *Gears* a great deal. What I was challenging was the award-worthiness of its campaign content. This, of course, became the theme of my print story, in which I worked to balance praise with implicit criticism, without pushing the one to the point that it muted the other, or vice versa. And it was equally important to allow Epic to communicate its position."



• What color sunglasses is Brumak wearing?

Surely there'll be fans of this type of city-building genre, a type in which what you plop down and where doesn't appear to be half as important as what little giggly colorful stimulus responses you get from watching it. I, however, and many hundreds of thousands of others, I would venture to guess, are not fans of this and were hoping for a more streamlined but also more realistic *sim*—as in simulation—version of *SimCity* that would get us ever closer to being able to model our hometowns and cities with better accuracy and fun bells and whistles. More types of roads. Perhaps a preindustrial starting period that would let us watch our cities turn into the skyscraper farms that SC3 and 4 would generate over time as technology advanced. But all that possibility is thrown out for cheap graphical gimmicks and simplified gameplay. It's a shame.

Sean Breazeal

While reading the "High Society" (GFW #8, pg. 58), which touches base on the makeover of the *SimCity* franchise, I noticed in the two-page picture that begins the feature that, of the six cars shown, there are only three unique designs. Are we yet again going to have to endure the monotony of such a small variety of models in this redesign? I ask not that every car ever designed be modeled, but that perhaps each model be rendered in a full spectrum of colors (of course, 50 percent of these would be silver to reflect the American market). Also, I believe that Scott Sharkey's picture in the Review Crew lineup was mistakenly replaced with one of a young Charles Manson.

Nick Rahme

We do not envy developers who have to show their games to folks before they're finished making them. Nor do we envy developers who dare to change even a single detail when it

comes time to make a sequel. It's an uphill battle for sure (*Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* creator Paul Wedgwood discusses this very thing in the



• *SimCity: Societies* dares head off in a different direction.

CITY LIMITS

It was with mixed horror and depression that I read Ryan Scott's preview of *SimCity: Societies* (GFW #8, pg. 58), a game which purports to "return to *SimCity*'s roots" while stripping out everything that's made a *SimCity* title for the last 18 years. No zoning? No power and water grids to worry about? No roads beyond the terribly unrealistic-looking, squashed four-lane things there now? The ability to make haunted theme parks, mime factories, Stalinist cryo-prisons, and a

whole city that looks like something out of Willy Wonka's franchising-opportunities guide is supposed to appeal to lifelong fans of the series? I humbly beg Maxis to not allow this kind of dumbed-down gameplay style to pervade and become the whole of the *SimCity* universe. From every screenshot and preview of this game I've seen, the hype is all about making totally unrealistic fantasy-type cities: Orwellian slums, *Candy Land* nonsense, industrial hellholes, things out of the great stereotype playbook.

MAIL BYTES

Jeff Green gained some respect from me a while back with an article he did about older gamers and how they typically aren't accepted so well. But 99 percent of all respect I'd gained for the man flew out the window when I looked at his article in the back of GFW #7 (pg. 98) and read these words: "Griefing is fun."

Humblehermits

Thank God, or Allah, or maybe prescription painkillers, that someone in the industry has the balls to come out and tell Microsoft that they are morons for what they are doing with Live. It's people who aren't afraid to stand up to the big corporations (even if they are your boss) that furthers the industry in a positive way.

Skylar Osborne

Is *Myst* seriously not in your Hall of Fame (GFW #9, pg. 66)? Also, I would like to recommend *Leisure Suit Larry* and *BioForge*.

Brandon

GFW Interview on pg. 38). All we can say is, hey, give it a chance. We can count the number of games that turned out exactly like we thought from reading (or writing) previews on one hand.

ROGER ACTION: FOR REAL?

In your latest issue (GFW #9, pg. 30), you interviewed someone by the name of Roger Action. Is this guy for real? Did he really reply with answers like that? Seriously, I thought that FMV stuff only existed in arcade games from 10-plus years ago.

On an unrelated topic...any word on when you'll be covering the big up-and-coming MMOs such as *Pirates of the Burning Sea*, *Stargate Worlds*, or *Star Trek Online*...because I don't know how long *Lord of the Rings Online* will keep me busy!

Adam Ruhoff

Roger Action not real? We posed your question to interviewer Seanbaby, who responded: "Normally, I'd think this letter came from a little kid, but that's impossible. Because, obviously, he was born before doctors knew the effects of drinking during pregnancy."



• One less role that didn't go to Roger Action thanks to "polygons."

PERSONALITY

You guys are doing a bang-up job on your podcast. I've sampled maybe 10 or so gaming podcasts over the past couple of years, and yours is the only one (of three that I still download) that I listen to as soon as it's downloaded.... It brings a personality and a "face" (ironically enough) to the author of a game review, which otherwise would be just another generic Anglo-Saxon American name at the end of the review. I feel that if you can somehow integrate that into the magazine (and I see that you're trying to do that a bit with the podcast-summary article thing), it would help out your readers tremendously.

Michael K. Bruner

We all have our favorite critics in other media—the voice you know you can trust, or at the very least, the voice you know how to interpret to figure out if you're gonna like something. We are indeed trying to integrate that whole "personality" thing into the magazine in the form of the Review Crew—if you haven't seen it, visit the Reviews section opener. You can find all the faces in that Review Crew list online at ReviewCrew.1UP.com, where you can go read their blogs and stuff. And Blogs are kinda like one-person written podcasts. Sorta.

INACCURATE INACCURACIES

It's interesting that in your "Historical Inaccuracies" Letter of the Month in the August issue (GFW #9, pg. 16), Sean Wattles' diatribe on

the origins of baklava cites the wrong river when he refers to George Washington's mythic silver dollar toss across a river. In the interest of historical accuracy, please note that the river in this folklore is the Rappahannock, not the Potomac.

John Hummel

PAC-MAN

I wanted to believe that when *Computer Gaming World* became *Games for Windows* it wasn't going to be a blatant advertising platform for Microsoft.



I even did for a few issues...well, mostly. However, all that changed when I read Jeff Green's editorial in the August issue, "Dot Bomb" (GFW #9, pg. 102). Could this have been more of a plug for the Xbox 360 and Xbox Live? I understand the concept of simple games being fun and that graphics aren't everything (ooh, water!), but did you really have to pick Microsoft's latest darling? Did you have to do it with a platform title rather than a Flash game or freeware title?

I understand the fantastic joy of *Pac-Man*. And if I hadn't already wasted hours of my youth with *Pac-Man*, *Ms. Pac-Man*, *Baby Pac-Man*, *Super Pac-Man* and whatever other *Pac-Spinoffs* you could name (no cheating with Internet help), I might be willing to play this game you mention... if it [were] available to me on my PC. But since this remake of a quarter-century-old title is not available to Windows gamers—despite Microsoft's claims that they fully support the PC platform—I'll just play *Overlord*, which covers much of what you speak of while still rendering very nice water.

Jeff Sanders

BIOWHAT?

Every time I read an article in a GFW about *BioShock*, it rings bells from the hazy distant past of the early days of 3D gaming. There was a sci-fi-based game where you started by breaking out of prison (don't they all?), but in this one your first fight was with a nearby prisoner whom you had to beat to death with his own severed arm because there were no other weapons nearby. Wasn't this old game called *BioShock*? Or was it something similar? Please tell me I didn't just dream this old game.

Eric Hill



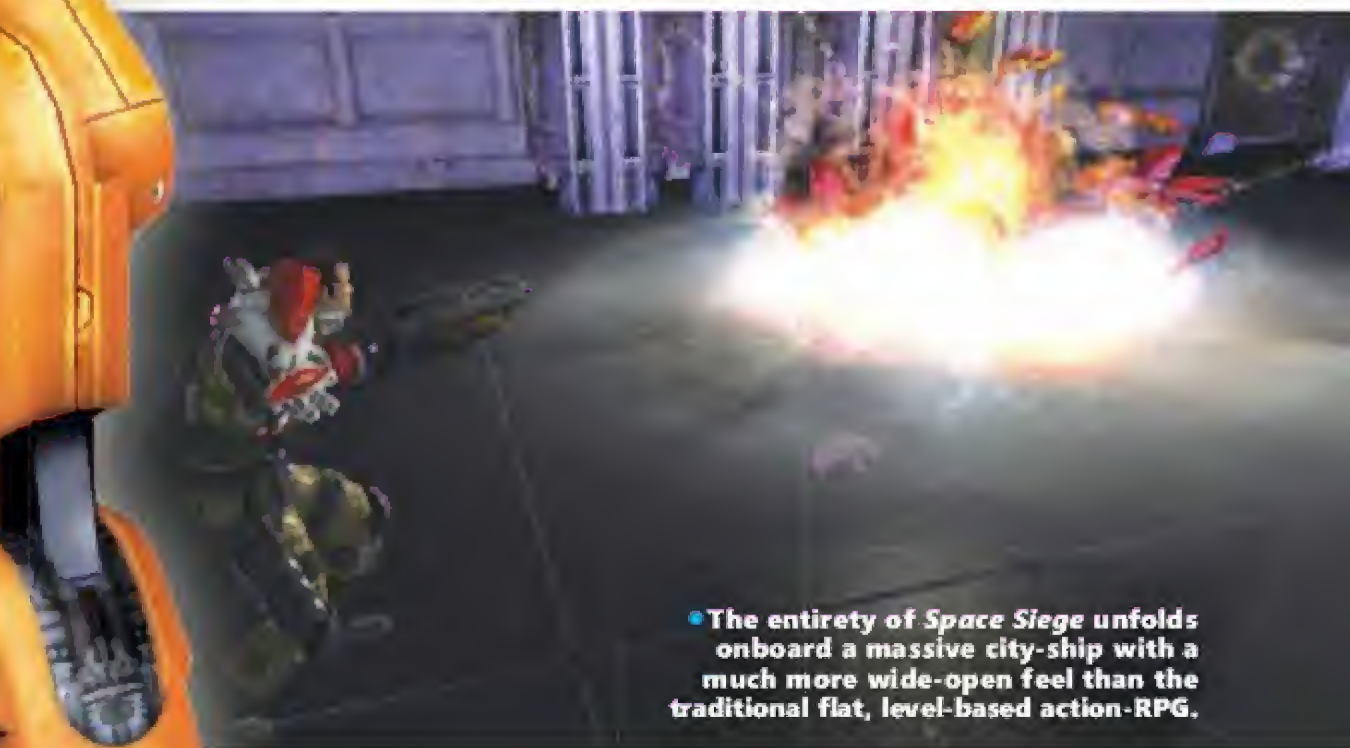
You didn't dream it. It was called *BioForge*, a sort of *Alone in the Dark*-ish sci-fi adventure from Origin. It came out in 1995, and it was rad.

Got something profound to say? Write to GFWLetters@ziffdavis.com.



Start

News, Previews, and Pert Opinion



• The entirety of *Space Siege* unfolds onboard a massive city-ship with a much more wide-open feel than the traditional flat, level-based action-RPG.



PREVIEW

StarCraft II

Hands on with the Protoss; new intel on the Terrans.

28



INTERVIEW

GFW Interview

Candid career chat with Splash Damage star Paul Wedgwood.

38



TRENDS

Spoiler-Proof

GFW investigates the freedom and fetters of license-driven MMORPG design.

46

SPACE SIEGE

Out of the dungeon

PUBLISHER: Sega DEVELOPER: Gas Powered Games GENRE: Action-RPG RELEASE DATE: 2008

PREVIEW

These days, fantasy action-RPGs bore Gas Powered Games CEO and creative director Chris Taylor to tears—a feeling that obviously doesn't do the studio's flagship *Dungeon Siege* series any favors. "We did about three different treatments [for *Dungeon Siege III*]," he says. "It was pretty obvious, after doing those, that we were burned out." So how do Taylor and his team reinvigorate the tired *Siege* franchise?



• Seth Walker and his steel soulmate, HR-V, fight in a world that even your DX9 card can handle.

EASY: SEND IT TO THE FUTURE

Space Siege paints a gloomy picture of humanity's destiny, following the voyage of the space vessel *Armstrong* in the year 2202 as it flees the Kerak—hostile alien invaders who live to kill. We learn that these aggressors systematically destroyed Earth and all its inhabitants in the wake of humankind's efforts to colonize other planets. As *Space Siege* begins, the Kerak breach the *Armstrong*...and the lives of the last 21,308 humans in the galaxy are placed in the hands of Allied Security Forces robotics specialist Seth Walker—and him alone.

ROBOCOP

"The feedback we received over the years on *Dungeon Siege* was that the big parties were interesting, but they weren't preferred," Taylor explains. "It was great to experiment with the formula a bit, but ultimately we discovered that players like to focus on a single character." Walker's solo adventures across the *Armstrong*—a vast city-ship that encompasses a mix of environments—bring about some interesting character development choices. As a robotics expert, Walker can go the *Shadowrun* route and replace limbs and organs with cybernetic implants...or he can resist temptation and preserve his humanity for as long as possible.

This presents something of a moral quandary: Cybernetic enhancements provide quick and easy power, but many of the game's NPCs treat Walker differently, becoming more unnerved (and reluctant to offer help) as he slowly transforms from man to machine. It's not really a clear-cut good/evil choice, says Taylor. "It does share space, conceptually, with [games like] *Knights of the Old Republic*, but it goes to a different place—where the end result isn't immediately obvious. When starting a game, most players know if they want to be good or evil...but will they really know how they feel about becoming a robot?"

These decisions also affect Walker's relationship with the *Armstrong* itself. Certain enhancements might allow you to fool security systems or survive in toxic areas, while simultaneously declaring some locations off-limits (some of the *Armstrong's* security systems involve electromagnetic pulses...or, in other words, no robots allowed). Various cybernetic pieces also unlock new (and otherwise unavailable) options in *Space Siege's* skill tree, which features Combat (gun-fu), Engineering (traps and other inventions), and Robotics (upgrades for your mech sidekick) branches. Equipping a pair of cyber-eyes might let you learn a skill that improves your critical hit chance, while replacement hands strengthen your melee attacks, and upgraded internal organs yield a longer life bar.

JOHNNY FIVE

Taking the cyber-free high road brings obvious challenges, though Taylor insists that it's possible to finish the game with your humanity 100 percent intact (with multiple endings to encourage such efforts). Walker's constant sidekick and adorable robo-pal HR-V (that's "Harvey" to you) is an eager recipient of any unwanted implants... and depending on how you balance HR-V's development with relation to Walker's, he could wind up as either backup firepower or a frontline wrecking machine.

"We didn't structure the gameplay so that you're forced to decide this in a big way," Taylor points out. "It's a much more casual question... 'Is this armor going to HR-V, or to Walker?' You can upgrade and push both of these characters down the high-tech highway if you want to... especially if Walker continues to develop specific skills [in the Robotics skill tree] that he can use to upgrade HR-V." And in the event of HR-V's untimely death on the battlefield, don't fret—you can have him tip-top again in no time. And if you're dead set against turning Walker into HR-VI, you're gonna need the help. • Ryan Scott

WALKER CAN GO THE SHADOWRUN ROUTE AND REPLACE LIMBS AND ORGANS WITH CYBERNETIC IMPLANTS...OR HE CAN RESIST TEMPTATION AND PRESERVE HIS HUMANITY FOR AS LONG AS POSSIBLE.



NO FAIR!

In Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames, Mia Consalvo shows there's more than one way to play the game



• Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames author Mia Consalvo.



ing one of those shadowy gold-farming organizations, advertising *WOW* coin and character-leveling for sale. I've fallen prey to in-game spam: the Azerothian equivalent of a telemarketing call, and something new since my last visit. The fact that it happens in what's called the "whisper" function only adds to the shadiness of the proposition, as if a trench coat-clad Gnome had appeared from behind a bush, looked over his shoulder carefully, and then murmured: *Psst. Hey, Blood Elf—wanna buy a watch?*

Buying farmed gold or paying to level your character is kind of like downloading pirated music or buying bootleg DVDs: Even though so many people do it, a significant number of us choose not to. In the case of gold farming, it's not merely because we're afraid of the repercussions of getting discovered and banned by Blizzard; some of us undoubtedly see it as a manner of *cheating*, something that would actually detract from our desired game experience. But some of the same people who would never buy illicit gold from users named Xvgcmlmdgdf likely have no problem Googling a walkthrough to help tackle a particularly tricky quest, accessing information shared on WoWWiki.com to plan the best way to level their alchemy skills, or tapping cheat codes into an console shooter to play a few rounds with an immortal character and unlimited ammo. Some players classify certain unorthodox practices as unfair, while others don't; it seems some kinds of rule-twisting or "skipping ahead" might be OK, while others cross an invisible moral line.

Clearly, the nature of cheating is complex, so it's not surprising that even before the rise of computer gaming, the practice's puzzled philosophers and anthropologists alike. If games are voluntary situations—sets of rules we consciously choose to follow in order to make believe and have fun—why do we so often ignore the very same rules we've agreed to? How do we decide which rules to break, and when?

ILLUSTRATION BY JOSHUA ELLINGSON

CULTURE

Abandoning my commitment to a few months of *World of Warcraft* detox, I logged back on not long ago, just to tool around a bit with my Blood Elf Warlock. I'm running around alone in the jungle somewhere north of Booty Bay, exploring the map but not really doing anything else in particular, when suddenly someone I've never met privately text-messages me; she or he has a strangely spelled and unfamiliar name, along the lines of Xvgcmlmdgdf. I quickly realize my newfound friend isn't exactly another player at all: Rather, it's someone—or maybe even just a bot—represent-



A HISTORY OF CHEATING

In the 1930s, social historian Johan Huizinga mused on the topic of cheating in his landmark book, *Homo Ludens*, a study of how the quality he dubbed the “play element” pervades every aspect of human culture. Huizinga distinguished between two related types of game wreckers: the cheater and the spoilsport. The cheater, he wrote, is a “false player,” someone who “pretends to be playing the game,” but bends or breaks some of the rules, often secretly.

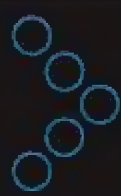
The spoilsport, however, “shatters the play world itself,” ignoring the fundamentals of the game in order to ruin the experience for others. Cheaters would like the game to continue—after all, they’re breaking the rules in order to win or do better than others—but the spoilsport takes delight in “despoiling” the game as such. Cheaters want to win the game, while spoilsports seek to ruin it; the former might sneak extra moves on the board, but the latter topples the board over. In fair play, everyone can potentially have fun, but both cheaters and spoilsports get their jollies at the expense of others’ enjoyment. Huizinga’s spoilsport could be seen as the ancestor of today’s griefer: that notorious class of gamer whose only fun seems to come from harassing others by egregiously violating the social rules of the game, by looting treasure, slaughtering noobs, or sitting by corpses waiting for respawns. Griefing becomes a minigame in itself, at odds with the goals of the game as a whole, but offering its own variant of delinquent fun.

In the 1970s, the Canadian philosopher Bernard Suits expanded on Huizinga’s concept, adding a type he calls “triflers” to this list of ne’er-do-wells. In his book *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, Suits defines triflers as “quasi-players” who don’t break the rules but rather ignore the ultimate goals of the game. Suits brings up the fanciful example of someone

who seems to be playing chess normally against another player—but, in fact, is simply moving his pieces at random each turn. Triflers don’t stop the game, but competing against them won’t produce a satisfying experience. Suits sums up his system succinctly: “Triflers recognize rules but not goals, cheats recognize goals but not rules, players recognize both rules and goals, and spoilsports recognize neither rules nor goals.” You’ve probably trifled with games yourself: Imagine dawdling through levels of *Civilization* just to see what happens under certain circumstances, with no intention of following the game to completion. But because so much of gaming is about exploring the possibilities of an imaginary space or objects—think of the time we’ve all wasted running around Liberty City with no goal in sight—it seems that trifling might be something more often than not built into the experience of contemporary games. After all, what is *Second Life* but an enormous, goalless world filled with triflers?

Mia Consalvo, a professor at Ohio University, attempts to update Huizinga and Suits for the digital age in her new study *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*. Triflers and spoilsports might be easy to identify when you’re talking about *Candy Land* or *Monopoly*, but cheating is a much more complicated matter in electronic games, where players have much more agency, rules aren’t always apparent or fixed, and the technology itself open to tinkering. In fact, Consalvo argues, cheating isn’t just more common in videogames—it’s become an industry unto itself, and a vital component to the business and culture of gaming as a whole.

Consalvo begins her inquiry with a history of cheating in electronic gaming. For her, cheat culture begins with the invention of the “Easter egg” in 1978 by Warren Robinett, the designer and programmer of the classic Atari 2600 title *Adventure*. Peeved that the actual creators of games received such >



"MOST [GAMERS] ENGAGE IN THE PRACTICE [OF CHEATING] ON A REGULAR BASIS."

—MIA CONSALVO
AUTHOR *CHEATING GAINING
ADVANTAGE IN VIDEOGAMES*



• **Left: Atari 2600 title *Adventure* introduced gamers to the notion of "Easter eggs." Right: Are Chinese MMORPG gold farmers actually cheating?**

little public credit at the time, Robinett decided to take matters into his own hands and secretly added an extra room inside the game containing his own name in flashing prismatic letters. In order to enter the room, the player had to find an invisible dot the size of a single pixel and place it against a certain wall, which then became permeable. The idea caught on, and other Easter eggs were coded into early console games. Most were purely ornamental until the 2600 port of *Space Invaders*, which included what Consalvo calls a "functional Easter egg." Players of a certain age may remember this: If you held down the reset button on the 2600 while starting up *Space Invaders*, your gun could fire twice in one shot. *Space Invaders*' Easter egg was the earliest variant of a revolutionary gaming concept: the cheat code.

At the time, information about Easter eggs—like much game-related info of the era—mainly spread through word of mouth. This changed in the late 1980s, when a new generation of gaming print publications emerged. Magazines of the period contained most of the content they do now, such as previews and reviews, but they also included detailed game guides, maps, and "secret hints." *Nintendo Power*, for example, devoted articles to the "Konami Code," a password that unlocked free power-ups. Unlike earlier games, players input this "cheat" directly into the joypad. "Secret hints," Consalvo notes, were kept separate from the more general game overviews—as "an addendum or even superbonus part of gameplay," she says, "but not the core of the experience."

Much of the more detailed information found in early game magazines soon migrated to an entirely new genre of literature: the strategy guide, which came into its own in the early 1990s. The first strategy guides were written and published unofficially, and at first focused on the more elaborate PC titles, not console games. *Myst: The Official Strategy Guide*, printed in 1993, was the genre's first runaway hit. By this time, most strategy guides were created with the official help of the game publishers themselves; as the demand for guides grew, working with the designers became the only way to get them out on shelves at the same time as the games. Though much of the information in strategy guides would become available online, they nonetheless remain more successful than ever. Consalvo notes that BradyGames, one of the leading strategy-guide publishers, put out 30 guide titles in 1990, but 70 in 2003. Worldwide, the strategy-guide-publishing industry now rakes in between \$100 million and \$250 million a year. But despite their success, strategy guides remain positioned as marginal to the authentic gaming experience. Consalvo writes that "strategy guides may be one of the few, if perhaps only, texts that actually beg you *not* to use them unless stuck or to rely on them too heavily."

CHEATING CONDONED

Yet one coveted type of information isn't included in strategy guides at all: cheat codes. Consalvo points out the irony here, since the strategy-guide industry couldn't exist without cheat codes: They're the only way their teams of researchers and writers can quickly master new games in order to pump out new guides in time for their games' release. Instead, gaming publishers hit on a better use for cheat codes, doling them out to game magazines in exchange for premium coverage and promoting the codes themselves to squeeze extra shelf life out of titles. So, far from being truly illicit, cheat codes have become a moneymaking strategy for the publishers themselves. "As more and more people actually finish fewer and fewer games, the opportunity to extend the life of games becomes important," Consalvo writes. "There is now an expectation that game codes will be released shortly after a game's release, which can add value to a game and return revenue to the game publishers, as well as the magazine publishers' pockets." Free access to online cheat information is currently changing this system, however. Competition from sites like GameFAQs led to the folding

of Larry Flynt's magazine *Tips & Tricks* earlier this year, and some publishers now bypass print altogether and sell cheats directly through services such as Xbox Live.

But other forms of cheating don't add to publishers' profits—a genre Consalvo calls "technological cheating devices": software tweekers and cheat-code compendiums like the Game Genie that actually alter console hardware. The game industry wasn't too happy that, in the U.S., Nintendo lost an early lawsuit against Galoob's Game Genie, opening the floodgates to similar products. But the Entertainment Software Association successfully prosecuted against mod chips, positioning the technology as a variant of piracy: one mod-chip maker was even sentenced to five months in prison in 2003. Consalvo argues that mod chips don't typically allow anything that the hardware itself isn't capable of doing: "They allow the user to determine her own proper use, ironically by restoring consoles to their full (original) capabilities."

Of course, with PC games, hacking code is nothing new, and Consalvo points out that for many years, modding single-player games wasn't classified as "cheating" at all; many publishers even encouraged it. But as PC gaming went online, modding came to be seen in a more nefarious light. "It can ruin the experience of noncheaters," Consalvo notes, "and potentially kill a game's longevity or even initial sales." As with console hacking, online game-modding becomes a threat to gameplay—and, therefore, to business. Thus, the rise of the "game security" field: a countercheating microindustry centering around cheat-stopper software like SecurePlay, Cheating-Death, and PunkBuster. While these products seek to maintain a level playing field, Consalvo warns that there could be side effects paralleling issues in copyright protection. "Just as with digital rights management, the encrypting of game code or data closes off access to the functioning of games," she writes. "Such actions will likely prevent security breaches and cheating problems, but they might keep experimentation and exploration in check."

The second half of Consalvo's book draws from numerous interviews she conducted with gamers about what they consider cheating, when they cheat, and how they deal with other players' cheating. She found that players talked about cheating in one of a few broad categories: cheating as an unfair advantage, cheating as a way to avoid getting through a game "on your own," cheating as breaking the internal rules of the game (however defined, whether as social practice or actual code), and cheating as a purely interplayer phenomenon ("You can't cheat a GameCube; you can only cheat another player"). Even though gamers generally classify cheating as not quite playing the game correctly, they all cheat nonetheless. "Although players have definite ideas about what does and does not constitute cheating," she writes, "most of them engage in the practice on a regular basis," and say they do so for a variety of reasons: to avoid getting "stuck," for the fun of playing god, to speed up a slow game, or just "being an ass" through griefing.

True enough, you might say, but what does Consalvo's sociological parsing teach us about games that we didn't already know? By taking cheating seriously, she seeks to shake up the conventional ways we tend to think about the history of games, showing that the evolution of gaming isn't merely a top-down affair, dictated by the latest platform or hit game, but involves a great deal more give-and-take between consumers and industry—and that cheating itself now constitutes a substantial industry as well. And by noting the wide variety of practices and beliefs that different gamers hold about cheating, Consalvo shows how complex the experience of gaming has become, and how a new form of ethics may need to emerge. Maybe, she says, we should drop the whole notion of cheating altogether and embrace the inherent breakability of gamespace rules. "What is unfortunate is that popular discourse tends to judge in-game behaviors by the rules that operate in daily nongame life," she argues. "But why must players hold their actions in games to what is really a separate standard?" • Ed Halter

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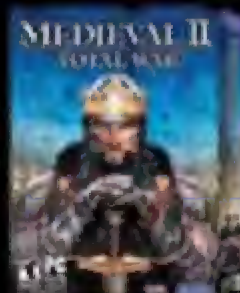
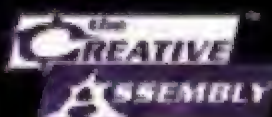
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Alcohol and Tobacco Reference
Blood
Mild Language
Sexual Themes
Violence

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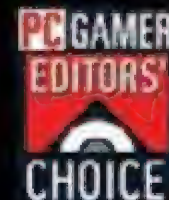
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XTRAS

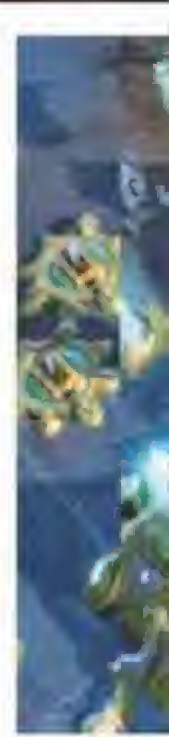
You'll find more hands-on impressions along with a video chat with the *StarCraft II* creators at GFW10.1UP.com.



• The Terran side's leaping Reaper can hop into an enemy base, leave behind timed explosives, and then hop out again to safety.



• New Terran units include the lumbering Thor and transforming Viking ships. For a more complete picture, turn to [pg. 30](#).



STARCRRAFT II

A chemical reaction

PUBLISHER: **Blizzard** DEVELOPER: **Blizzard** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **When it's done**



• **Blizzard decided early on in SCII development to leave the leveling-up "hero units" to WarCraft.**



• **A nuclear strike doesn't have to devastate—some units can counter by going underground.**

HANDS-ON

➔ **Noble gases** don't know whether they're destined to become a sun in some planet's sky or a balloon at a Roy Rogers grand reopening; neither do the High Templars or Banshee gunships in *StarCraft II*. Pedigree tips the odds in sundom's favor. And lead designer Dustin Browder and lead producer Chris Sigaty clearly know what a star is made of: a trillion moving pieces, one of which—a Protoss Mothership with its air-unit-engulfing black hole generator—just wiped out an entire enemy fleet with a single mana bar. Browder laughs and acknowledges that, yup, she's way too powerful right now, as a dozen of my opponent's expensive ships unfairly blink out of existence. If the delicate chemistry is off, the whole thing goes supernova. One minute, millions are playing—the next minute, nobody.

Playing a multiplayer round of *SC2* at this stage of development (Protoss versus Protoss only, at least for now) feels a lot like playing chess before someone decided that bishops could move diagonally, or that knights could pass through other pieces, and while there was still a piece called the duke who could warp from one edge of the board to another. The Mothership is the Protoss' queen, and Browder's team is still devising a counter that doesn't involve sacrificing an entire row of pawns.

"We want to create relationships for the Mothership that allow you to deal with her mana threat," says Browder, "so you can deal with her black hole even before she fires it, so you don't just *have* to lose seven units [before] you get to kill her...and hopefully it's not 'You build this unit, and then she dies.'"

Browder's irked by the standard rochambeau shorthand that folks commonly use to describe unit interplay, but that's how I'm naturally playing (blame partly goes to inexperience with the new stuff, partly to a heavily rock-paper-scissors-oriented presentation at *SC2*'s May 2007 unveiling in South Korea). My scout spots a startling airfield of Tempest carriers; I pour resources into researching black holes (even though for now they're basically an exploit) and scanning unit descriptors for phrases like "antiair" or "really good at killing Tempests."

"Our goal is definitely *not* to create an environment where it's just rock-paper-scissors," says Browder. "We want the game to be very much about position-based gameplay. So yes, I brought a unit that's a bit of a counter for your unit. But hey,

if you maneuver around the terrain in the right way or set up certain combos of units, it doesn't necessarily matter. For instance, in the game right now, Zealots [short-range Protoss melee brawlers] absolutely, dollar-for-dollar, will counter Stalkers [long-range gunners]. But if there's a choke point, then all that overlapping firepower from the Stalkers will tear up the Zealots because only two or three can get through at a time. Or if the Stalker blinks away from the Zealots, they can do this rolling retreat where, if the Zealots are trying to gank one, he [warps] to the back of the line. We want to have lots of different options to deal with any threat on the battlefield so you don't just say, 'Well, I brought the wrong units; I guess I'll just type GG and quit.'"

A placeholder tech tree, crafted in what looks like Microsoft Paint, mentions the "Eye of Amun" (a second Protoss defensive structure in addition to the mobile Phase Cannon) and other units that are no longer part of the Protoss' repertoire. The Eye's gone now, according to Browder, because playtesters constantly challenged the need for two types of "boring" protective towers. "We don't want to have a unit list of 40 units per side," says Browder. "We're still feeling out what's the maximum we can get away with before it seems like there's just way too many units and they start overlapping their abilities." So as new units are born, old ones naturally retire: Firebats, a common Terran defense against the infamous Zergling rush, aren't a part of *StarCraft II*—neither are Medics, but Browder says any of these may still return, vanish, and return again in some mutant form. (For a more complete breakdown of the current Terran plan, flip to pg. 30.)

"We're trying to give you all-new strategies and tactics," says Browder, "but still make it feel like you're playing this game that you love from 10 years ago." That familiar feeling's already there—vespene gas, crystalline minerals, warped-in Pylons; I know these—though comfort vanishes once you start drilling down into the tech trees and realize you have no idea exactly when or why you'd want to build a Star Relic...or how you'd respond if your opponent sent over a dozen of them.

Change is always terrifying to any fan base (just ask *Fallout 3* developer Bethesda, who finds little support among old-school *Fallout* fans online), but fear of the unknown doesn't faze Blizzard. "Where it could have gone bad," says Sigaty, "is if we [had] gone really crazy and tried to reinvent the genre. And then everybody's like, 'What did you just do to my game? This is *my* game...and you screwed it up.'" >

“OUR GOAL IS NOT TO CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE IT'S JUST ROCK-PAPER-SCISSORS. WE WANT IT TO BE ABOUT POSITION-BASED GAMEPLAY.”

—DUSTIN BROWDER, LEAD DESIGNER

THE TERRANS' TURN

Blizzard designs *StarCraft II*'s three factions in passes—first up were the Protoss; next up, the Terran; then the Zerg; and then around and around again, rebalancing and applying the latest lessons learned till it's time to let her go. The newly revealed Terran units (still works in progress) stress mobility and base defense. • Sean Molloy

BARRACKS

The standard infantry-producing building can now be augmented with one of two add-on structures: the Tech Lab, used to build bigger, better units, or the Nuclear Reactor (shown here), which adds a second production queue when it's time to churn out forces for battle. Since certain Terran base buildings can pack up and fly, different unit-producing structures can be dropped next to the add-ons to mix and match benefits.



BANSHEE GUNSHIP

The rocket pods on this dedicated antigrav unit fire in a straight line, doing serious splash damage, which makes them generally good for taking out groups of Zealots or Zerglings. Banshees can cloak, but they have no anti-air abilities whatsoever.



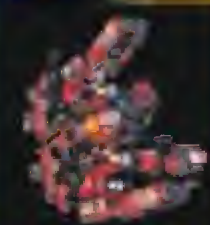
MARINE

For now, the basic Terran ground infantry unit remains unchanged from its tour of duty in the original SC. Place them in a bunker to up their defense; use Ghosts to call in a squad of them from orbit.



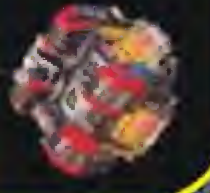
THOR

This juggernaut isn't built in a factory but out on the field. It's equipped with two forward-facing charge beams and cannons for long-range artillery bombardment, but its speed (and poor turning radius) make it easy for quick units to swarm it and take advantage of its weak points.



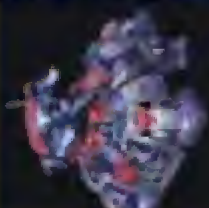
FACTORY

Like the barracks, your machine-unit mill can take an add-on—either the Nuclear Reactor or the Tech Lab.



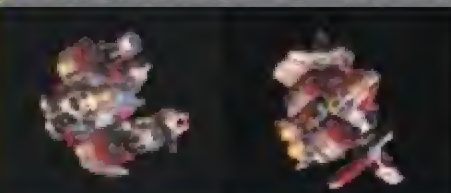
PLANETARY FORTRESS

Upgrade your headquarters, and it'll grow a mounted laser cannon on top to take out incoming hordes while your army is off on another front.



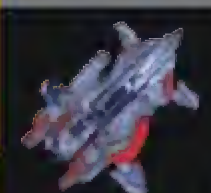
VIKING

It morphs from a flying unit (Fighter Mode) to a walker (Assault Mode) depending on what kind of enemy forces you encounter. Handy for when you need to enter a situation blindly.



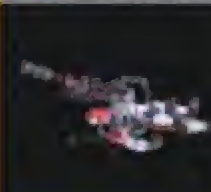
COBRA

This speedy Terran tank comes mounted with a rail gun; a small convoy of these can encircle a big, lumbering unit like the Thor (which packs major firepower, but has a terrible turning radius) and make quick work of it without many casualties.



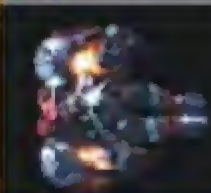
GHOST

The original game's elite commandos come equipped with a sniper rifle to make quick work of biological foes, and they can call in both nuclear strikes and drop pods containing a small infantry platoon (currently comprising eight Marines) from the heavens.



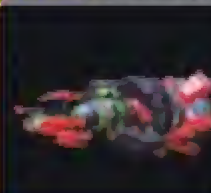
REAPER

This leaping infantry unit can nullify the advantage of height and make gaps in the ground inconsequential. Move it into an enemy base, plant timed (but defusable) explosive charges, and get out before your foe's base defenses do you in.



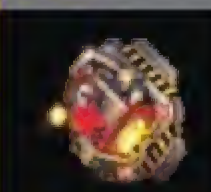
SENSOR DOME

This building detects enemy units within the fog of war (within a certain radius). Foes are represented whole-sale with nondescript colored circles on the ground, meaning you know *who's* coming—but you don't know *what's* coming.



SUPPLY DEPOT

The Terran resource silo now doubles as a security door: Block off base entrances with rows of depots so the enemy can't simply walk through, and sink them into the ground when you need to let your own land units pass.



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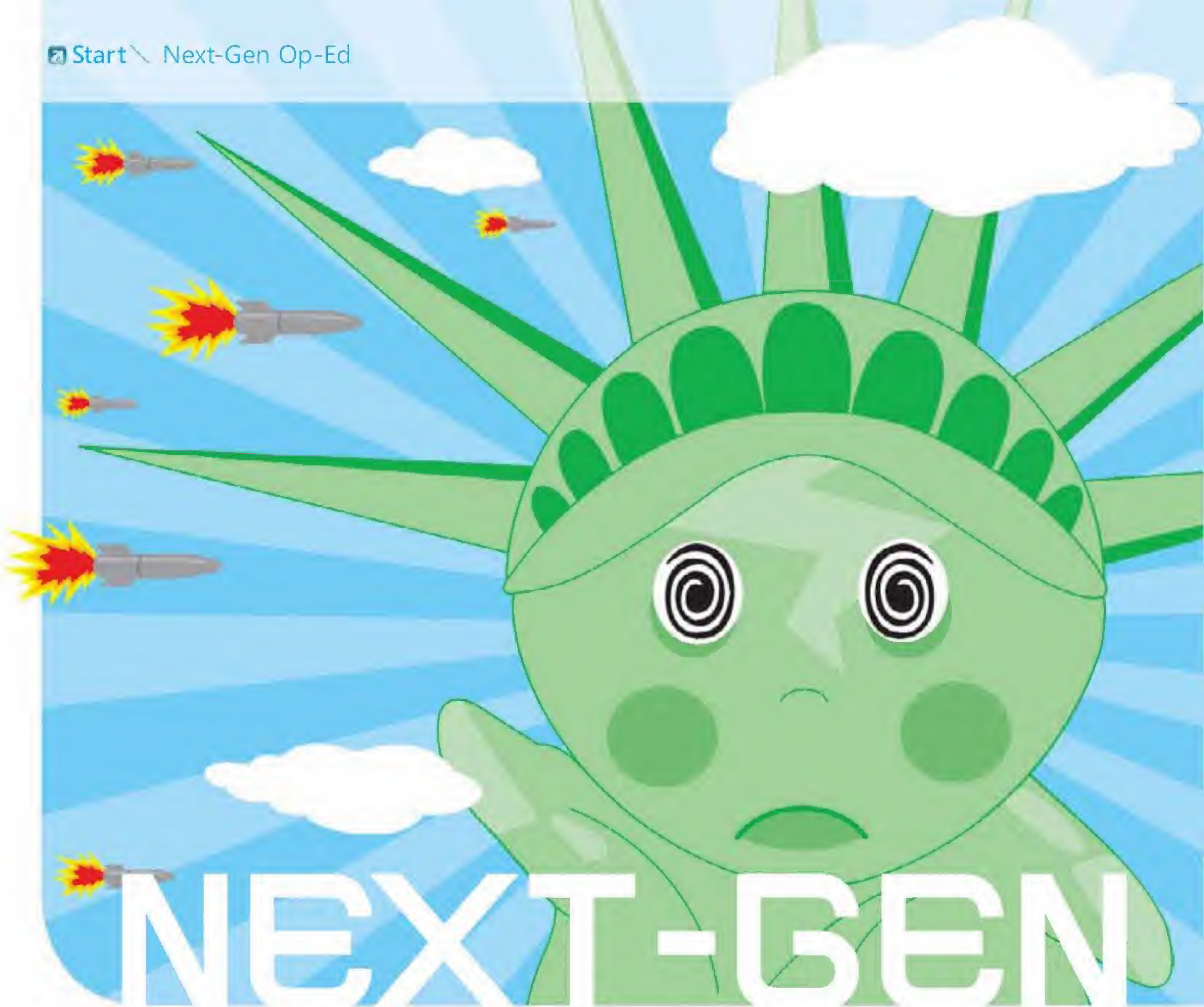
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• Persuasive Games lead designer Ian Bogost

CULTURE

➔ **It's been a big year** for Persuasive Games. In May, the Atlanta-based indie developer announced a partnership with *The New York Times* to bring its games to the paper's online op-ed section. One month later, Persuasive scored a similar deal with CNN.com. They've even hooked up with PBS—not half bad for a couple of months' work.

But don't be fooled: Persuasive hasn't somehow managed to convince the suits at otherwise respectable news institutions to start shilling shooters and *Civ* clones to their readership. Instead, the studio is developing "newsgames": short, casual games that zero in on a specific news story dominating the headlines—anything from immigration visas to the differences between the 2008 presidential candidates.

Part simulation, part political cartoon, these games transform ongoing stories into interactive digital sandboxes in which readers can learn about the causes, trends, and relationships that drive current events. "[Newsgames] give our readers a fresh perspective," says Mary Duenwald, deputy op-ed editor of *The New*

WE KNOW, WE KNOW: GAMES ABOUT THE NEWS? RIIIGHT. BUT PERSUASIVE GAMES BELIEVES NEWSGAMES CAN WORK.

SCORE 16

LIVES 

OP-ED

Persuasive Games crossbreeds the editorial and the videogame

York Times, "a special Web-based, visual perspective on the news."

"It sounds a little bold," says Ian Bogost, lead designer at Persuasive Games and assistant professor at Georgia Tech School of Literature, Communication, and Culture, "but I might go so far as to say that this concept of newsgames might be one of the first real reinventions of the news media in a long, long time."

BECOMING THE STORY

We know, we know: Games about the news? *Riiiiight*. Riveting, to be sure. But Persuasive believes newsgames can work—and as proof, Bogost points you to food safety.

What makes it into America's food supply is a hot topic these days, especially after the Food and Drug Administration issued several recalls and bans on imported goods from China. The new government regulation spans everything from pet food to fish to toothpaste. But very little media attention has focused on the mounting difficulties faced by the understaffed and underfunded FDA in carrying out these inspections.

That's not entirely the press' fault. International food inspection is a tangled, quixotic operation,

plagued by bureaucracy, supply and demand, and dozens of other social and economic factors. Print, images, and video can do a good job of approximating that complexity, but they can never really replicate it. The only way you can truly understand the challenges the FDA faces is to *become* the FDA and tromp a mile in its shoes.

That's where Persuasive comes in. "The thing about games is that they're good at representing complex systems and the interaction of lots of moving parts," says Bogost. "That's something that film and the written word are capable of but don't do quite as well. Games are a really great way of getting at those issues."

In Persuasive's first offering for *NYTimes.com*, *Food Import Folly*, you play an FDA inspector in charge of protecting America's food supply from contaminants in foreign imports. You must inspect millions of shipments, juggling speed with thoroughness and very limited manpower. *Food Import Folly* conserves words and images and lets players essentially become the story, which gets the important ideas across more completely—and in a fraction of the time—as a traditional article or news clip would.

"I'm not suggesting we replace our news with games," says Bogost. "But there's something

that we can get access to that we can't with text or images."

Persuasive Games, founded over four years ago by Bogost and Gerard LaFond, already boasts an impressive "serious games" résumé. You might recognize their *The Arcade Wire* series produced for Shockwave.com, which includes titles like *Airport Security*, *Bacteria Salad*, and *Oil God*. The studio has also created corporate training sims, advertising, educational games, and even election-year campaign tools.

However, the *New York Times* and CNN.com partnerships mark the first time the studio's games will reach a wide nongamer audience, which, oddly enough, has been done with very little fanfare. You won't find these newsgames behind any special, cordoned-off "videogame" sections. Instead, *The New York Times* places Persuasive's work in its op-ed section, alongside the rest of the paper's editorials, letters, and political cartoons, and CNN.com posts newsgames directly on its front page, undistinguished from the rest of its headline and video content. "I think it's kind of counterintuitively exciting to make games more mundane and ordinary," says Bogost. "By putting games out >

• **Oil God** casts players as an oil conglomerate determined to double the price of crude in five years.



• **Presidential Pong:** interactive political humor



• **Airport Security's** inspection rules change rapidly. Frustrating? That's the idea.

there to people who don't consider themselves game players, about topics they could be interested in, we can increase the reputation and reach of the medium."

And, as far as the media's concerned, that can come none too soon. It's no secret that traditional news outlets like newspapers and TV programs have struggled to maintain their audiences since the Internet explosion. Newspaper subscriptions have plummeted in the past five years, and nightly news viewership for all networks is at a 27-year low. Even the 24-hour news channels can't keep pace with the near-instantaneous reaction time of the blogosphere.

To stay relevant, many news organizations have adopted an "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" approach, hastily constructing websites, media portals, and RSS feeds to keep hold of their dwindling audiences. But those steps may not be enough. "They're taking their old concepts—written news, video, and photographs—and just moving them online," says Bogost. "But it's not really a form that takes advantage of the computer. You're just re-delivering the same content you were creating for the newspaper."

On the other hand, videogames, with their simulated environments and rendered graphics, do exploit the computational power of today's PC, making them the natural choice for a third-wave news medium. "These little editorial games could represent one step in what the news-media world could look like in the

future," says Bogost, "where the news is really computational, rather than just being distributed on the Web."

At the same time, videogame tech has its downsides. Even though Persuasive's news-games are far from graphical powerhouses, they still take substantially longer to assemble than an 800-word article or even an editorial cartoon. That means Bogost and his team must choose their topics carefully. Day-to-day headlines, like a missing-person case or the outcome of a particular congressional vote, are so timely that they'll be forgotten in a few weeks—any game about those topics would be irrelevant before it's even released. But larger issues, like the Iraq War or Social Security, are too broad, making it impossible to condense them into one five-minute game. "We're looking for topics the news finds really poignant and specific," says Bogost. "Editorials should be timely, and they should be relevant."

There's also one key point to keep in mind: Unlike normal videogames, Persuasive's news-games aren't trying to hook repeat players. "I don't necessarily expect people to come back and play these games again and again, although their design supports it," says Bogost. "My primary goal isn't to get people to come back—it's to editorialize."

Bogost says he's been in talks to produce newsgames for other companies, although "it's too early to really talk about it out loud," he says. The studio has also announced a game on the politics of nutrition, *Fatworld*, commis-

sioned by PBS, ITVS, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and scheduled for release this fall.

Persuasive is slated to produce six monthly newsgames for NYTimes.com's TimesSelect section (the part of the website for paying subscribers). But exactly which subjects they'll cover is still up in the air. "The subject matter isn't decided until a few weeks before the games are published," says Duenwald. "We want it to be as current as possible."

As for CNN.com's games, Bogost can't talk details or intended release dates, but he does say that those games will focus on "larger, deeper game experiences, compared to the small-scale games we've been doing for *The New York Times*."

So how's the reception been from the average webcrawler to these newsgames? So far, silence. "We haven't seen a lot of feedback from them, and the funny thing is I think that's kind of desirable," says Bogost. "Say I'm an average reader who doesn't know much about newsgames; I'm not really looking to critique the production value, you know? I'm here to see what you have to say and how it relates to the ways I see the world."

"The response wouldn't really be something we'd see right away, anyway," he says. "What you take away from these games percolates inside your brain, and then you read more or you might bring that topic up in conversation, and so on. It will come out in a lot of ways we'd never expect." • **Lara Crigger**

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UNREAL TOURNAMENT 3

Extra-vehicular activity

PUBLISHER: Midway DEVELOPER: Epic Games GENRE: First-Person Shooter RELEASE DATE: November

PREVIEW

➤ Epic VP Mark Rein is rolling into a Raleigh, North Carolina service station when I ask him about Xbox Live user Dreamer61's infamous *Forza 2* ride. "I can't believe my wife left me with no frickin' gas," he complains over his cell phone. "She does this all the time!"

Emblazoned with swastika, SS insignia, and other National Socialist German Workers Party trappings, Dreamer61's Mercedes epitomizes questionable user-created content. And *Unreal Tournament 3*, which allows PlayStation 3 players to import maps and mods made on PC, must answer the question the car provokes, too: How much freedom is too much freedom? "You're free to create what you want, to express your artistic vision," he says and laughs. "Lots of museums have pictures of naked ladies...."

"They don't have the Hitler hoopdie, do they?" "No, they don't. But you know what? They could. If that had been a real car, painted up like that, and it was a historical thing that illustrated how terrible the Nazis were...that's the beauty of free speech."

Once I shake the sounds of an imagined audio tour from my head—roaring engines and enraged teens on Live—I acknowledge that we've adapted to the leeway (although online players started painting Valve games putrid ages ago, and even though we still fly phal-luses through *Second Life* now and then). For his part, Rein's not concerned about potential cross-platform pranking: "*Unreal Tournament 2004* has thousands of mods, and I haven't seen any objectionable stuff. People with the talent to make mods are making cool things; they're not breaking the boundaries of social acceptability."

The Western world is pretty permissive of made-up violence, though, and *Unreal* revels in it. Take, for instance, death by Manta, a sort of

Everglades airboat with downward-facing fans. "If you land on those blades, it does what logic dictates," says *UT3*'s irrepressible lead producer Jeff Morris. "You get sucked through the meat grinder, and gore paints the terrain beneath." The grisly outcome is Epic's response to unexpected player ingenuity. "Originally, Mantas couldn't carry flags in *UT2004* CTF," he explains. "They're much too fast for that mode." Nonetheless, he found flag carriers jumping onto nacelles—an evolution of wing-walking exploits that became standard practice in *Battlefield 1942*.

The way the Manta now works will likely serve as more than a "no step" notice. Rodeo-type play is already in place: Jackrabbit infantry jumps away from or over deathracers. Now drivers feint and then slam on the brakes until a bounding opponent falls straight through the fans.

Says Morris: "The Impact Hammer [a pneumatic piston weapon] has a new electromagnetic-pulse functionality, and that's great for the 'Toro! Toro!' gameplay you're talking about. If you use



“That’s the one nice thing about A.I. opponents,” says lead producer Jeff Morris. “In the [single-player/co-op] campaign, we can create things like the Crawl, which are Necris attack dogs that outnumber you and aren’t so skilled. The multiplayer game has got to be balanced. Everybody starts symmetrical. In single-player, there’s no need to worry.”

MENT 3



its alt-fire against a driver, it forces him to eject and freezes his vehicle for 15 seconds. This goes for all of our game types—we make sure death-match skills stay relevant. If you’re good, and the foe you’re facing is in a Dark Walker, you can kick his ass out, kill him, and then take it for yourself. Your repertoire of attacks against vehicles is richer and more robust than before. You know,” he adds, “our mantra is that one-third of the game should be improved, one-third should stay the same—since we want to please people who loved previous UTs—and one-third should be new.”

Where UT3’s Manta is a tweaked model of an old design, the Scavenger is definitely a debut. “It’s basically another Necris battle walker, but lower to the ground,” Morris says. “Instead of a tripod posture, it has legs that launch out and pull it along.” No lumbering mech, the Scavenger is nimble and spiderlike. Morris compares its mobility to a fleet foot soldier’s, and says its second form—the legs retract, leaving you with a rolling cockpit that crushes players

in its path—is “more or less *Marble Madness*.” Pulling the primary fire trigger juts its bladed “toes” out just a bit, turning the ball into a bouncing garbage disposal.

If you’re imagining flea-hopping up steep slopes and barreling back down, that’s the idea. “Absolutely,” Morris says. “Hoverboarders benefit from the same kind of thinking. There are a lot of natural halfpipes in our levels; you let inertia carry you up one side, then [you] can catch air, rotate, and drop back down. Since day one, our design philosophy has been that weapons—and vehicles are weapons—ought to be enjoyable to use, even when you’re blasting away at walls with them.”

Fun, offline as well as on, is another of Epic’s UT3 emphases, and both Morris and Rein guarantee that their game offers unplugged players more than bots and sporadic talking heads. According to Morris, “halfway through the game, there’s this huge invasion,” and the occupying force affects the territory that you’ve already fought for. “Things change dramatically in the

campaign. You must make decisions; if you don’t directly attack this new opponent, they’re going to grow stronger, and when you deal with them again, they’ll have different vehicles at their disposal, and there may be more of them.”

In one mission, your task is to requisition a Dark Walker from a Necris research site; succeed and the booty is yours to use later on. Another operation involves sabotaging the other side’s Lazarus technology. “UT is about respawning rather than reloading,” Morris says, “so we’re introducing the idea of resawner machinery. The whole idea is that wars aren’t fought with giant armies; they’re fought with elite guys who’re essentially immortal. That makes respawners major strategic objectives, since if you destroy them, the enemy elite become mere mortals.”

Curiously, Epic hasn’t committed to adapting the concept to a multiplayer mode that turns into a *Counter-Strike*-style war of attrition, although Morris isn’t writing the angle off altogether: “Hey, we’re not done yet.” •Shawn Elliott



THE GFW INTERVIEW: PAUL WEDGWOOD

Quake warrior remembers his roots BY SHAWN ELLIOTT

**1997-2000****Discovers multiplayer Quake mod Team Fortress (1997); manages competitive TF clan; makes Quake III mod Q3F****2001-2003****Founds Splash Damage (2001), which develops freeware first-person shooter Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory for id Software and Activision (2003)****2007****Designs Enemy Territory: Quake Wars (with Splash Damage and id Software)**

INTERVIEW

GFW: Who are the giants whose shoulders you stand on?

PAUL WEDGWOOD: In 1981 my mum bought me a secondhand Sinclair ZX81, which I think you called the Timex Sinclair 1000 or something. This predates rubber keyboard keys. It used the cells with air bubbles in them, and they popped when you pushed them. No ability to save at all. I would write games by copying code out of books, and if I typed everything correctly I'd eventually get a black square to move three spaces, and then I'd have to turn off and start again. I played the Sinclair Spectrum, then the Commodore 64...but I was poor. I had no money and never owned a console.

GFW: Whose hardware were you working with?

PW: My friend's. We'd skip school and write fruit machines. We waited for his mum to go off to work, and then we went back to the house. Or I would buy a book that taught me about two-dimensional arrays and how you could make each square a room, and you could store the data for the description of that room in each of those squares in the two-dimensional array. So I'd design simple adventures, stuff of that sort. I was expelled from school for fiddling with their Link 480Z computer network....

GFW: Were you sent to reform school?

PW: No, they sent me to an "assessment center" where they said, "He's not crazy, but he's never going to pay attention." [Laughs] If we had trailer parks in England, that would be where I grew up—they call them "council estates," and they're these massive blocks, and everyone there is crazy and there for a reason, you know? In my case, my parents split up, and that was it. But my mum put me back into college and I started taking computer science courses.

In 1997, I somehow installed *Team Fortress* on my computer. I had no idea what it was or how I got it.

GFW: There's the giant! I had something similar happen with Team Fortress Classic. I bought the Half-Life Game of the Year box that came with Counter-Strike and assorted shooters. Finally I found something [in the package] that worked well with software rendering and a dial-up connection. Until then, I only knew GoldenEye on Nintendo 64—suddenly I was seeing rocket jumpers, concussion jumpers....

PW: I remember the day someone discovered concing. It was a guy called Ciderpunk in Clan Spice Girls <SG>, who were our absolute archrivals in *Team Fortress*. We hated them; they hated us—we went back and forth between being the No. 1 and No. 2 clans in the U.K.

GFW: TF cocreator Robin Walker once told me that his team made the game with the technique in mind...which seems weird.

PW: Well, I never saw a single person conc jump prior to *Team Fortress 2.9*. So somehow *Team Fortress* ended up on my drive, and I absolutely adored it. I didn't understand mods. I went online and I read about them, and within three months I found the EarthQuakers server. So I joined them, and they turned out to be one of the oldest *Quake* clans.

IF WE HAD TRAILER PARKS
IN ENGLAND, THAT WOULD
BE WHERE I GREW UP.

GFW: Did you try out?

PW: Yeah, I played a match on the 2tech4 map. I was an Engineer, which was the best class to play with a poor Internet connection, because servers tracked the sentry guns. The clan's leader was losing motivation, so I took over. We went on to play 150 or more matches a year. I had absolutely no social life at all. And I was married at the time!

GFW: How hardcore was your leadership?

PW: Oh god, I wrote my first ever design document, which I called Dynamically Modifiable Offense and Defense, or D-Mod. It was a system that told people what colors they had to set on their player models, what positions they had to play on each and every map, what they ought to do in specific situations (for instance, if we had their flag, then our midfield players would move forward). Then we developed what we called the EQ Advanced Communication System, which was basically the F12 [commands], but you could also toggle Control, Shift, and Alt for a total of 148 or so messages.

GFW: And you remembered them all?

PW: You had to. Everyone had to. We had an incoming bank, an outgoing bank, and these allowed us to call out the flag's location.

GFW: No voice-over IP solutions....

PW: None. A little later Quizmo came along, though.

GFW: How big was clan competition back then?

PW: Massive. I had the same realization that led Gabe Newell to leave Microsoft and start Valve. It's a story and I'm not sure that it's necessarily true, but basically, he discovered that *Doom* was installed on more computers than Windows. Windows was on 36 million PCs....

When *Quake* and *Team Fortress* went away, we were headless for a while... *Quake III* was on the horizon and we wanted to make a class-based mod. I'd hired Robert Duffy to work internally on their tools. We're best mates these days, but back then he knew me as the guy who always annoyed him on IRC and ICQ, saying, "Give us the SDK [software development kit]. When are we going to get it?" We eventually got it and made *Q3F*.

GFW: Q3F as in Quake III Fortress?

PW: Yeah. We call it *Q3F* for legal reasons. We didn't want to frustrate Valve. We just wanted to play this thing within our own community, because we weren't on *Quake I* anymore.

GFW: You once worked in a computer specialty shop. Have you followed the retail scene since then?

PW: It's changed so much. Way back when, working in a PC shop was like—what's the movie called?—*High Fidelity*. Completely insane. Opposite me was this big Sikh guy called Disco Bill. He sold disco equipment and played rhythm and blues through these massive speakers—he blasted us and all of our customers. I'd try [to] find good graphics demos—a spinning chrome ball that reflected a chessboard or whatever—to show off the computer screens. There was this huge bodybuilder in the workshop downstairs. I was supposed to join him as computer engineer, and this other guy who turned up was supposed to go into sales. However, within two hours I'd annoyed the bodybuilder, because I had such a big mouth, and he had me up against the wall—like this, by my throat—and was screaming, "Get the hell out of my workshop!" I walked upstairs and said, "Hey, Adam, want to become a workshop engineer?" He said, "Yeah, sales sucks," and so we just switched places.

GFW: Are you following Team Fortress 2?

PW: It looks like it's going to be good fun. I like the *Incredibles* style. I mean, it's interesting, because—I think I told you this before—my memory of the ramp room in *Team Fortress* is real. It's as though I really spent time in that room....

GFW: To the point where we're able to comment on where they've elongated a corridor by a yard....

PW: Yeah. I couldn't play *Team Fortress Classic*, because I was so used to the shape and size of *TF*. I felt too high off the ground, the ramps were too steep, or this and that. Plus, we went into the *Team Fortress Classic* community saying we were the best *Team Fortress* clan, and that we were going to kick ass. We lost our first game 6-nil, quit the server, and said *Team Fortress Classic*'s a pile of s***! That wasn't what we thought...it's just hard to make the move to the next generation. >



• *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*

GFW: That seems pretty common with competitive shooters. You wear the setup, the physics, and the controls in the way you would a second skin. Then the time comes to switch over to some other FPS, and....

PW: It's like buying a new pair of jogging shoes or something, but I'm not a sportsman, so I wouldn't know....

GFW: Driving your neighbor's car?

PW: Right. It could be a better car, but it feels wrong.

GFW: You want to sell new experiences. Is it an issue for you?

PW: [Id coowner] Kevin Cloud once said that since multiplayer communities want exactly what they've got right now, you shouldn't change anything—only make it better. And that's the challenge.

GFW: But now and then something breaks through—*TF*, *Operation Flashpoint*, *Battlefield 1942*—and creates its own community.

PW: One website—what we'd call a fansite if they didn't hate us so much—is a venomous pit of hatred where Splash Damage's current work is concerned. And they're the biggest fans of whatever we did last. I thought *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* multiplayer was an absolute revelation when it came out. It did away with the idea of symmetrical teams. It had asymmetrical maps, where one team attacked and the other defended. It used objective-oriented play, which meant that you pursued something worthwhile, and spawn timers to bring teams in together. That allowed for balanced asymmetrical maps: Axis might spawn more quickly than the Allies if they had a longer route to run. It was genius. I think Kevin [Cloud] got the idea from a board game.

But back to your point, yeah, adapting to change is always a problem. The people who were playing *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* hated Splash Damage when we were making *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory*. "Experience points and character advancement [are] for newbies! So is the covert ops character class!" So was whatever else we were adding. Today, that *same website* and those *same people* go to every *Wolfenstein: ET* tournament, only now they're saying exactly the same stuff about *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*.

GFW: I see this on a per-patch level. Before they've even tried an update, clan players decide that any change is bad, that the developer hates them.

PW: Exactly. That's what happened when we were modmakers. Everyone absolutely loved beta 1.h [of *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory*]. We devoted a year to beta 2. We reworked the entire user interface, we modeled and animated a rotating steel door, we changed character-class models, and more—and everybody hated it and said beta 1.h was better.

GFW: I take it you put a cooldown period on these things—let your critics think changes through, give them time to adjust before you go to the drawing board?

PW: Yeah, you can't overreact to initial criticism. And I don't want to explain everything about the way the game works to everybody; I like to leave things for gamers to discover—all the advanced tricks and tactics, like planting an explosive charge on a quad bike and rolling it into enemy troops.

GFW: And from the players' perspective, it's always, "We're two hours in and we're already finding faults. Did this developer not play its own game?" Some people I play with truly think that gamemakers are oblivious to the games they make.

PW: I want to think that we're aware of every single aspect of our games. You can add any feature to a game and know that it will satisfy some players and upset others. Take sniping, for instance: A fun sniper kit has to support headshot kills. Popping away at somebody as he runs past isn't interesting. However, the least enjoyable experience in gaming is getting shot in the head, right? A sniper wants instant headshot kills; nonsnipers want the second shot to kill. In *Wolfenstein: ET*, we worked in the notion of the helmet. You have to shoot the helmet off to score the kill. There's usually a compromise like that...but you can't design by committee since everyone wants something different.

GFW: The more variable and the less symmetrical the game, the less likely gamers are to agree on its balance. Our biggest complaint always involves whichever way we died last.

PW: Knowing how and why you died is supersignificant.

GFW: Right. And where it was once either the railgun or the rocket, now it's—well, was it an artillery barrage? A vehicle with a bomb on it?

PW: It's like real-time strategy games. We banned *Red Alert 2* during development because we would get so outrageously aggressive with one another. We'd stand up and shout at each other across our desks, phlegm flying. We were so screamingly angry, and it always boiled down to one person doing something that the other person didn't know how to defend against. Splash Damage art director Richard Jolly realized that if you flew over a base and bailed out with a spy, you could then run around behind the buildings, constantly blowing up structures. You hear him whispering, "I'm in disguise," right, and the one and only way to defeat this nonsense is to have dogs around, only none of us knew that.

GFW: Get wise. You've gotta use spectator views and replays.

PW: Oh, when *WarCraft III* came out, I went online, searched for build orders, found five or six of them, and taped them to the side of my monitor. Did exactly that with the Night Elves and kicked everyone's ass in the office by following seven steps.

GFW: That's the thing with RTS, though...that's like having an opening strategy in chess, but then not necessarily knowing how to handle a clever counter-opening....

PW: And like chess, you need to understand every single unit in the game and what its strengths and weaknesses are. I think the key to strategic shooters like *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* is that you don't have to have a battlefield commander, and so no single person is in charge of the entire experience. As long as everyone knows their job and does it well, they'll do well as a team.

GFW: The more players your game supports, the messier things get, and the more you're blamed for problems that might have as much to do with the way some people are or aren't playing. It's your duty as the developer to encourage players to work together properly, though, isn't it?

PW: Yeah. Teams need to coordinate, otherwise there's no point—you might as well play 1-versus-1 matches. And it works the same way for people who play in clans and meet on IRC and build playbooks in advance. A tactic will work for a few matches, and then the opposing clan figures it out and devises a counter-tactic or technique. It exists in competitive shooters in the same way that it does in real-time strategy. Still, the goal should be to give a group of strangers on a public server the same coordination that organized clan play offers.

Many people will not know what other team players are doing, but they will know what their job is. And that's how war works, right? On a real battlefield, one guy knows how to operate the radio and relay a set of coordinates. The guy with the artillery gun knows to fire his gun at the sets of coordinates he's given. It just comes back to on-the-job training. And accepting that people are selfishly motivated. How do I reward you for supporting your teammates so that you make the game more fun for other players?

GFW: It's definitely Darwinian—assuming every "organism" in the game is selfishly motivated....

PW: And then finding a way to reward you for repairing friendly artillery...and this goes for any game, really. If I can manage that, the entire team has fun making fellow players have more fun.

I IMAGINE IT WON'T
BE LONG BEFORE A
GAMERAZZI IS BORN.

GFW: Multiplayer games are often treated as incomplete packages, although the good ones offer more hours of entertainment and demand greater postrelease maintenance on the part of developers. Is this fair?

PW: There was this perception that multiplayer is what you add to single-player shooters. I think that games like *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory*, which won half a dozen Game of the Year awards, helped vindicate the notion that purely multiplayer games are perfectly OK. Everyone was saying, "People don't have broadband connections and graphics cards! Except for the 8 million that subscribe to *World of Warcraft* and who have graphics cards and broadband connections, there are none; they don't exist." I think that's pretty much gone away.

GFW: Has it, though? Many of *Shadowrun's* reviewers spent more space knocking the small number of maps than they did diving into the game itself.

PW: If you take a 20- or 40-man team and spend three years working on a game, then surely you've put in exactly the same effort as anyone making a stand-alone FPS. I'd say that the PC audience is already receptive to the idea of purely multiplayer shooters. And I think that console gamers are receptive to the idea, too. But if they buy a purely multiplayer FPS, and all they're doing is running around deathmatching on six maps, then they're going to be frustrated. It's not hard or expensive to make a six-map deathmatch game. It's not a challenge; it doesn't take a staff of dozens. It's the sort of thing that modmakers do. For a developer to charge for a game at a premium rate—I don't know about *Shadowrun* specifically because I haven't played it—but when a developer decides to charge X amount of money for a game, and its going up against the *Call of Duty* experience with its scripted sequences, actors, and orchestra scoring, then gamers are going to expect something of the same value.

GFW: Following up, I want to ask if you see something similar at work when we obsess over player counts in a way that implies bigger is unconditionally better? I call this the "parrot trap," where people repeat something and it becomes a rule prior to anyone truly thinking the proposition through. I think it stems from the tendency to promote games as the sum of their parts and then to explain and evaluate them on strength of their feature sets. It's not hard to know whether or not we're having fun, however, a game critic's job is to get to why. Unfortunately, it is by far easier to write a consumer report than a real review—to fall back on the inadequacies of these feature sets than it is to analyze an experience in its entirety, to say why we enjoy something.

PW: We made a multiplayer map for *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* called Market Garden. It was popular on servers that support 50 players, but tactically resulted in little more than "run and die". Once people became bored of being lemmings, they moved on to other maps; it was a short-lived trend, not an iterative improvement for objective-based gameplay.

The number of human or bot opponents that lead to the best possible experience is still similar to team sports like soccer or football. Having around 16 or 24 players on a game server (or a field in real life) makes for the perfect game right now, with as few as 12 for a focused clan/tournament match. Adding more players to a team sports match rarely improves the game, and the same is currently true for multiplayer combat.

GFW: What is the question you most want to answer that writers never ask?

PW: In interviews, I often feel that I don't have the opportunity to credit the massive effort that everyone on the development team undertakes. In general, I guess that developers are wary of writing anything that appears to be an "acceptance speech" in advance of actually becoming critically acclaimed. That's a shame; if journalists are [happy with] a game in development and decide to invite the studio figure head to talk about the team, the figure-head could do so without appearing to toot his company's trumpet.

Secondly, and in almost absolute opposition to the point above, I'm often surprised at how little interest journalists have in the personal lives of studio figureheads. I'd love to know where Gabe Newell goes on holiday, what Warren Spector drives, whether Peter Molyneux still plays table-top games against Ian Livingstone every week, and what Kevin Cloud's hobbies are—I'm sure he has some, though I've never witnessed him do anything but work solidly for five years. I imagine it won't be long, however, before a *Gamerazzi* is born. As the games industry grows closer to the film industry in model, I'm sure someone will start a gossip site that's as interesting to gamers as entertainment sites are to moviegoers. Let's face it, we all want photos of Cliff Bleszinski drunk and falling out of a nightclub. •

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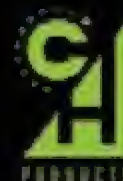


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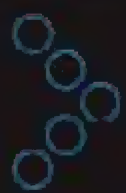
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• "In further episodes, the story's going to get weirder and weirder, sort of like the way Gabe and Tycho tell stories," says producer Joel DeYoung.



"SOMETIMES YOU JUST DON'T WANT TO KNOW HOW THIS S*** HAPPENS. JUST ENJOY YOUR HOT DOG."

-MIHE KRAHULIH, COCREATOR, PENNY ARCADE



• Gabe's on fisticuffs, Tycho's on tommy gun, and your custom character is on...upgradeable garden rake.

PENNY ARCADE ADVENTURES: ON THE RAIN-SLICK PRECIPICE OF DARKNESS—EPISODE ONE

Game critics turn game developers

PUBLISHER: TBA DEVELOPER: Hothead Games GENRE: Comic Adventure RELEASE DATE: December

PREVIEW

Mike Krahulik and Jerry Holkins are living the dream. Full-time creators of the hugely popular online comic *Penny Arcade*, the duo makes their living doing what they love: poking fun at game culture with absurd humor and dirty words. *Penny Arcade* follows the nonadventures of Gabe and Tycho, two cranky, media-damaged gamers (loosely based on Krahulik and Holkins), as they bicker about entertainment minutiae and drift into surreal, off-kilter punchlines. The comic is successful enough to afford its creators a sideline of generous charity work, while their website attracts enough enthusiastic geeks to warrant its own yearly event, the Penny Arcade Expo. Now Krahulik and Holkins have embarked on every gamer's ultimate fantasy: creating their own game.

"I think a lot of gamers have that fantasy," says Holkins, who's in charge of the dialogue in both the comic and the game. "Of course, the reality of actually writing a game has disabused me of that. It turns out that it's very much like work. And as the project nears completion, the amount of work that you have to do reaches infinity."

The pair has spent much of this year working with Canadian indie developer Hothead Games, slowly assembling their interactive debut: *Penny Arcade Adventures: On the Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness—Episode One*. The title alone surely required weeks of work, but it's a small price to pay for a behind-the-scenes understanding of the game-development process. "It's horrible," says Krahulik, who illustrates the comic and performs various art functions on the game. "It's like going to a sausage factory. Sometimes you just don't want to see how this s*** happens. Just enjoy your hot dog."

INTO THE SAUSAGE FACTORY

Hothead Games occupies a single-room office space in a downtown Vancouver neighborhood *Adventures* producer Joel DeYoung describes as "famous for tiny dogs and fake t***." DeYoung and the game's lead designer, Darren Evenson, hail from Alberta, and as such they talk at length about "hockey burgers," use the word "wicked" to describe everything from game features to sushi, and are about as genuinely nice as city dwellers can be, which might help to explain how such a small, untested studio landed the *Penny Arcade* gig.

"A lot of people who approached us in the past just wanted to license the brand," says Krahulik. "All they [wanted] the name, and then they [wanted] to go make something with it. Hothead actually wanted us to collaborate with them and help them make it." Partnering with a smaller inde-

pendent studio makes sense on other levels as well. "We have a robot that masturbates and then attacks you," says Krahulik. "We would not have been able to do that at EA. But when we tell Hothead, they're like, 'Yeah, let's do it!'"

With a team of former employees from local Vancouver giants like Radical Entertainment and EA Canada, Krahulik and Holkins aren't exactly in the hands of rank amateurs. The Hothead office has the upbeat atmosphere of corporate drones set free—perhaps too free. "It's nice not to have a publisher coming in and meddling in the game design," says DeYoung. "That said, I think there was something about having that monthly deadline when you have to get that milestone to the publisher or you weren't going to get paid." Having set up *Adventures* as a self-published, episodic, downloadable game (for PC, Mac, and Linux no less), the young studio has a lot of responsibility on its hands. Luckily (or unluckily), the developers are able to shift a large heap of work onto the desks of the comic's creators. "Jerry [Holkins] is writing the whole game," says Krahulik. "Every character that you interact with I drew at some point. We are 100 percent involved, and that's what was really appealing to me."

That level of involvement is obvious from the first moments of *Precipice of Darkness*, as the game's opening cinematic takes on the feel of a *Penny Arcade* animated feature film. We find Gabe and Tycho drawn in their usual style, though they seem to have landed in another time and place, a Victorian age of industrial technology and supernatural mystery. "It's always been my fantasy to write something loosely based in that 'terrifying universe' genre of pulp horror," says Holkins, who, along with everyone else on the team, references the works of early 20th-century horror author H.P. Lovecraft as a source of inspiration.

It's a huge shift away from the tone and subject matter of the comic, which often focuses on humorously skewering games. You might assume that a *Penny Arcade* game would be the perfect platform for satire, the ultimate gaming joke. "We never consciously avoided satirizing gaming," says Holkins. "It's just that that's our day job. When the time came to come up with a context and a setting, we actually wanted to try telling a more elaborate story." Holkins and Krahulik find themselves in the strange position of being on the other side of the artist-critic relationship. Where they once dished out criticism—often brutally—they will soon submit themselves to review by their peers, which puts a significant amount of pressure on those working on the project. "It's intimidating," says DeYoung. "These guys have said some mean things about a lot of people over the years." But Holkins and Krahulik say that, when it comes down to it, they simply want to make something worth playing. "We're actually trying to make a videogame to the best of our >



• Each episode will contain several lengthy cartoon cut-scenes. Says DeYoung, "Fans have really responded to those, so we're loading up on them."



ability," says Holkins. "We just wanted to give it a try." And if *Precipice* doesn't turn out as planned, will they take a critical beating? "I think the punches will be very large in nature," says Holkins. Their need to deliver a good game is probably the best reason to avoid *Penny Arcade's* usual setting and themes. "Their comic is about two guys sitting on a couch making fun of games," says DeYoung. "But sitting on a couch doesn't make for great gameplay."

What that gameplay entails is surprisingly complicated. "We call it a comic adventure," says DeYoung. "But it's definitely a funny game. It's a blend of two genres: classic adventure and role-playing game." The adventure part of the equation is a gimme, given the genre's comical prowess and storytelling tradition. The team has gone so far as to bring Ron Gilbert, creator of the esteemed *Monkey Island* adventure series, on board as a consultant. "Working with Ron on this has just been awesome," says DeYoung. "He really feels like humor is done poorly in games. It's hard to do, but he's very good at it. He's been an adviser for us on how to make a classic adventure game and how to make it funny."

The wild card in *Penny Arcade Adventures* is its RPG flavor, noticeable from the start in the team's decision to base the game around a player-created character instead of the comic's stars. "There was this question of who do you let them control, Gabe or Tycho? Do you switch?" says Evenson. "I think we get around that by giving the player their own character in the game, and they get to interact with Gabe and Tycho." And so, at the outset of the game, players will be greeted by a character-creation system. All the options are designed to fit within the distinctive art style of *Penny Arcade*, and though this limits the options, it does allow for one very neat trick: Once you've designed your character, he or she will appear in both the game (as a 3D model) and in the animated cut-scenes (as 2D Flash animation). "It's the mind-blowing technology we have here at Hothead," says a deprecating DeYoung.



• "We've got some really hilarious damage states for the enemies, explosions, and blood squirting everywhere," says lead designer Darren Evenson. "The violence is going to be over-the-top."

OF CLOWN SHOES AND CEL SHADING

Having designed our character, a dapper young man with Teddy Roosevelt whiskers and pinstriped purple dandy trousers, we set out on our adventure. At the onset of the story, our hero narrowly escapes death as an enormous robot ("Fruit F**er 2000" to the comic's aficionados) demolishes his house and runs away. Luckily, our hero happens to be in his yard raking leaves. Armed with a garden rake (now his only worldly possession), he sets out to find the offending robot, meeting up with Gabe and Tycho (who decide to join his quest) along the way. Soon, we find ourselves in Hobo Alley, a dilapidated skid-row town full of winos and heaps of living garbage. And wouldn't you know it? The garbage wants to fight.

During such a confrontation, the game transitions into a kind of simplified 16-bit-era RPG battle system, modernized with twitchy minigames. Upon being attacked, for example, the characters can block if the player presses the space bar at just the right moment. Some attacks use golf swing-style timing meters, while others require smashing

keyboard buttons as quickly as possible. "It's a turn-based system, but it's not strict," says DeYoung. "The goal is for there to be something to do all the time. You don't want to just stand around and watch." The battles are also another front for humor. Our party later finds itself in a fight with a gang of clowns, whose middle fingers appear to be frozen in a permanent state of "f*** you." They bleed rainbow-colored blood and throw clown shoes—which they have an endless supply of in the crotches of their clown pants.

The game does an admirable job of reproducing *Penny Arcade's* cartoony world in 3D, though it wasn't easy work. "I honestly just felt bad for [Hothead]," says Krahulik. "I never thought about my designs being 3D characters, and so a lot of them just don't make any sense in 3D. Like Gabe's hair—it just can't exist. When I saw them trying to build it in 3D, I felt so bad for them." So, is he satisfied with the way his creations look in the game? "Absolutely," says Krahulik. "For me, it's been incredible to see the characters move. It breathes life into them that wasn't there before. We spent nine years drawing these characters, and now we're getting to see them move. I can't explain how powerful that is." Regardless of how the game turns out, *Penny Arcade's* scribes feel lucky just to have the opportunity. "We started on a fluke," says Krahulik. "We didn't expect anything when we started, much less a game." • Robert Ashley

“THEIR COMIC IS ABOUT TWO GUYS SITTING ON A COUCH... SITTING ON A COUCH DOESN'T MAKE FOR GREAT GAMEPLAY.”

-JOEL DEYOUNG, PRODUCER, HOTHEAD GAMES

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SPOILER-PROOF

TRENDS

➔ In April, Turbine released *The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar*. LOTRO joined *Star Wars: Galaxies* and *The Matrix Online* as franchise crossovers. For fans of the root material, stepping into one of these three beloved franchises is a kind of homecoming. In *Star Wars: Galaxies*, you meet Han Solo in the first 10 minutes. In *The Matrix Online*, you take the red pill and learn kung fu. In *The Lord of the Rings Online*, you cower before a Nazgul before you've even found a weapon.

Welcome to the story-locked MMO.

A LONG TIME AGO...

Star Wars: Galaxies broke the ground, and it sold over a million copies in the two years following its 2003 release. And while the number

of players has declined since launch—and some controversial design changes have polarized its fans—its dedicated players are still entranced by the setting. “What the players love most about the game is *not* the fact that they get to hang out with Han Solo,” says Jake Neri, the LucasArts producer behind *Galaxies*. “It’s that they can create themselves inside an environment that they’re so familiar with. That’s where the real love comes out.” This is the story-locked MMO’s hook. It plays to the child inside all of us that’s daydreamed about shooting TIE fighters from the *Millennium Falcon*’s turrets.

But being first in the story-locked MMO field also means they were the first to learn the downside of being locked into a known story. *Galaxies* is inexorably trapped between the end of *Episode IV: A New Hope* and the beginning of *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*, a period in which virtually nothing happens in the *Star Wars* timeline.

Thus, the actions of players in *Galaxies* can’t make any lasting impact on the *Star Wars* story. And at the same time, they don’t overlap with events players want to witness.

Even Neri admits that a sense of confinement exists while playing in George Lucas’ sandbox. “I don’t think we would try to move the overall *Star Wars* story along. I don’t know if anyone could do that.” Because of this confinement and pressure between storylines, *Star Wars: Galaxies* focuses on helping serious in-character roleplayers tell their own stories. Need Princess Leia to preside over a wedding? Just let her know a week in advance, and she’ll be glad to oblige. And you can rent the tent, a podium, and a getaway starship from a vendor.

This level of direct interaction impacts even the most cynical, out-of-character fan. *Galaxies* GMs love dropping in on big player-organized PVP conflicts—the battles frequented by the most



Sometimes it's better when you know how an MMORPG ends

jaded stats-mongering veterans. "Suddenly, a bunch of hardcore gamers stand in a row and keep quiet while Vader inspects the troops and orders them into combat," Neri recalls. "There's something about having a Dark Lord of the Sith reviewing your troops that keeps everyone in line, even if they aren't roleplayers."

YOU HEAR THAT, MR. ANDERSON?

The Matrix Online takes this interaction with live GMs a step further by moving the story along in real time with the players. But this isn't a story that the players create: It's one they witness. "The *Matrix Online*'s story was always designed to be written out ahead of time—a year or so in advance," says Ben Chamberlain, a game designer for *Matrix Online*. This focus on predefined story is so important that the developers delivered a staggering twist just two months into the game. "We killed off Morpheus," recalls Chamberlain.

"The idea was to have a big story shock, to demonstrate that, yes, we can and will change the world of *The Matrix*."

Since then, *Matrix Online* GMs have maintained a brutal schedule, running live events in the world nearly every day and moving the story forward through a rigid six-week cycle. Each cycle culminates in a carefully scripted, voice-acted, scored, and storyboarded cinematic. The players are the firsthand witnesses to an ever-evolving serial work of fiction, fundamentally no different from reading *Oliver Twist* every month in the 1800s.

The Wachowski brothers, the founders of the *Matrix*-feast, approach story development for *Matrix Online* seriously, bringing in writer Paul Chadwick (*Concrete*) to work with Chamberlain day-to-day as the plot evolves. *Matrix Online* is, in a very real way, the only living, breathing continuation of the *Matrix* storyline. "The future is wide open—which, from a writing point of view,

is immensely liberating," says Chamberlain. "It also gives our ongoing story a real sense of mystery and drama, because players don't know where we're going."

THERE AND BACK AGAIN

Players of Turbine's *The Lord of the Rings Online*, by contrast, know exactly where it's going: to Mount Doom, with Ring in hand. "So, great—can I be Frodo? Can I hang out with Aragorn?" says Jeffrey Steefel, executive producer of *The Lord of the Rings Online*. Players know the story, and they want in. "But Tolkien didn't write 'and then Frodo and half a million of his good friends took the Ring to Mordor,'" Steefel points out.

Over the four and a half years of the game's development, Turbine tried different ways of bringing players into the story. At first, they imagined a parallel path where players would follow directly alongside the characters from the >

books, event by event, but always a step behind. "The ground's still warm! There's a footprint here! That looks like Strider's boot!" jokes Steefel. "Wow. That's really exciting," he says with clear sarcasm. "We didn't think that was going to be very fun."

So instead, they created a parallel storyline—one that intersects with the epic journey of the Ring-bearer but only hinted at in the corners of Tolkien's 1,400-page history of the War of the Ring: a new story, but one that lives in context—and in close contact—with the well-known plot. Authenticity is everything to the Turbine team. "We've got people on my team who speak Elvish," claims Steefel. "I'm not making that up. In two dialects."

That dedication to the lore clearly resonates with a certain group of players: those aching to be part of a story. "The game just nails the feeling

of Middle-earth," says Jason Wolfe, an endgame player from Canton, North Carolina. "The storyline quests really do feel epic."

LOTRO's critics rightly argue that this focus on story comes at the expense of any real innovation in gameplay. But Turbine's decision to not reinvent the wheels allowed it to focus on the car—getting the game to *feel* right. "The most important thing is that it has to be really fun. It has to be stunning. It has to be Middle-earth. It has to feel like Tolkien's world," explains Steefel.

And that's where *LOTRO* succeeds. "To be blunt, if you took *LOTRO* and replaced all Tolkien content with made-up names and places, I probably would never have gotten hooked," admits Joel Enderle, a *LOTRO* player since the beta. "*LOTRO* managed to capture all the familiarity that *World of Warcraft* cultivated without beating us over the head with wrongheaded attempts to be different for the sake of marketing."

THE OTHER GUYS

But from *World of Warcraft's* perspective, these story-locked MMOs are at a disadvantage. "Since it's always been a videogame, we've always been able to steer the story to suit our needs," explains Chris Metzen, Blizzard's vice president of creative development. "Depending on the product we're creating at any given time, we can push and pull on the scope, on the focus of the storyline, and the themes involved."

This flexibility has allowed Blizzard to craft stories unimaginable in *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, or *Lord of the Rings*—destroying planets, conjuring up new ones, and inventing new races out of whole cloth. But when it comes down to actually delivering

the story, Blizzard still takes it one step at a time. "Every placement of a rock—everything tells the story. A story isn't just lore," says Metzen. And it's *his* lore. Metzen is the closest thing to an "author" that *WOW* has.

Complexity is the downside of such flexibility. No canon of literature sits on a shelf for the developers to study. The *WOW* story gets bigger every day, and keeping track of everything gets harder. "I've made quite a bit of this up," says Metzen, "but there's no way it all fits in my head anymore." It takes a small army of lieutenants to keep track of things.

WOW endured its share of "retroactive continuity" issues—previous events cast in stone that need to be sandblasted and rewritten. "The needs of game design push and pull on story all day long," Metzen explains. And that means that things change—not just by accident, but on purpose. "It's not like writing a novel that's very linear and isn't going to be changed by outside conditions."

THE POWER OF THE PEN

The next story-locked MMO in line is Funcom's *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures*, due in October. At first blush, it seems to be taking more tone from Robert E. Howard's setting than a specific plot, which makes sense given the disconnected nature of the *Conan* stories. "The lore is immersed in absolutely everything we do," claims Gaute Godager, game director for *AOC*. In contrast to *LOTRO's* reliance on well-understood mechanics, this immersion seems to be one of style and gameplay more than plot. "In our hands-on combat system, the directness, toughness, and sheer bloodiness are direct extractions from Howard's work," he adds. It sounds entertaining enough—but until the game's released, we won't know how this translates into story, plot, and character experience.

These lore-based MMOs are a different beast than *World of Warcraft*, *Eve Online*, and those that came before them. They appeal to a different kind of player and offer different rewards. In a traditional MMO, hours of play and actual skill yield power in the form of money, items, abilities, and respect. These same rewards are present in nearly every MMO, including these spoiler-proof ones. But in the story-heavy MMO, the real reward for playing is unlocking the story itself. Accessing higher levels means accessing more *plot*.

Balancing the story longings of rabid fans and the need for genuinely entertaining gameplay is becoming the focal point of MMO development. And while Blizzard wrestles with the problems of ballooning storylines and continuity problems, its competitors will be wrestling their rented-content franchises into compelling games. Getting it right could mean the difference between being just another second-tier MMO and providing a genuine commercial alternative to "the big game." • Julian Murdoch



"TOLKIEN DIDN'T WRITE AND THEN FRODO AND HALF A MILLION OF HIS GOOD FRIENDS TOOK THE RING TO MORDOR."

—JEFFREY STEEFEL, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE

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THE FREELOADER PRESENTS



FREE PLAY

The best games that money can't buy

COLUMN



The Freeloader

Know about some sweet free games? Tip off our resident mooch! Freeloader@ziffdavis.com is the best way to reach him.

So the 1UP.com powers that be came up to me and asked, "Hey, jackhole! Would ya mind not panhandling in front of the office?"

No respect, I tell ya. I mean, this column about mooching free games doesn't just write itself. And they're surprised when I plead poverty in order to score some sympathy bucks? Then again, people weren't exactly biting with the "Need \$14.95 per month for WOW" approach—I'll have to rethink that cardboard sign campaign before the new expansion hits.

Anyhow, they wanted to know if I'd be interested in writing about freeware on a more regular basis

for the website. "Great!" says I. "How much money does it rake in?"

"Yeah...well...that's the thing. We won't pay you anything for the extra work."

Look, a number of adjectives may describe me: parsimonious, slothful, tumescent—but stupid ain't one of 'em. Fortunately, the 1UP Network is full of sucke...I mean "volunteers" just dying to contribute. Among them: deputy freeloaders Emily Balistrieri, Darren Gladstone, and Scott Sharkey. I've met them; they threw a couple bucks into my change cup. They're all right in my book. And I know I can count on these magnificent bastards to help me shoulder the mooch torch on the Internet.

Start checking for weekly Free Play updates from this crack team of crackheads on 1UP.com. And I ain't going anywhere. Free Play keeps comin' at you every month as planned—I'm just too damn lazy to write up stuff every week online. It's tough enough for these guys to make me write this thing once a month! • **The Freeloader**

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM

Will these freeware games run in Vista? I hear that color-coding life's problems goes a long way to soothing fears.

SEVERE
The "game" crashes now

ELEVATED
The "basic features" stop now

GUARDED
The "minor bugs" appear now

LOW
The "wow" starts now

XTRAS

FREE GAMES!

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Pop the Pimples



THE GAME: NovaWare: Clicked! FILE UNDER: WarloShareWare

Word has it that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery—or, as I like to think of it, the cheap man's way to get a Nintendo game on my PC. It's pretty obvious from the get-go that *NovaWare: Clicked!* is a tribute to the Nintendo DS game *WarioWare: Touched!* Not sure what I'm yammering about? Imagine a game that's packed with minigames. Given brief (or no) instructions, you must figure out what the heck you're supposed to do in a matter of seconds to win the minigame. Over time, the puzzles become more complex and come at you faster.

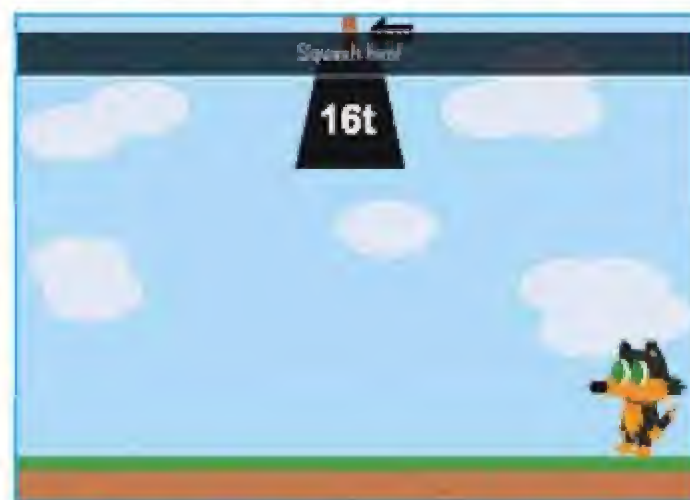
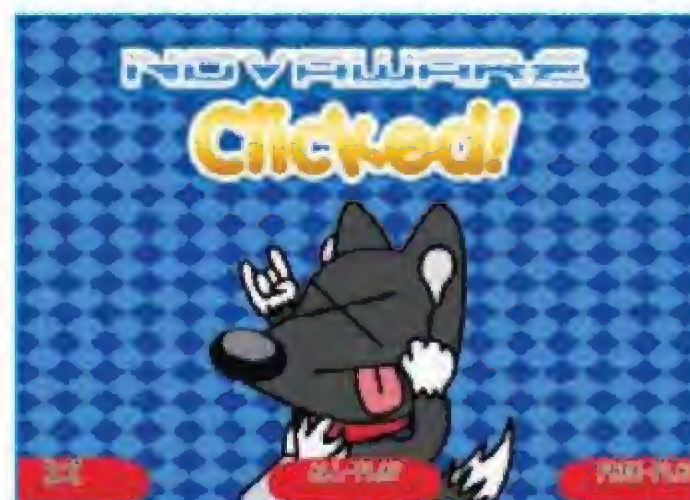
So how does the PC game play? Pretty much the same way. The main difference is that instead of tapping a tiny screen with a stylus you're clicking on a tiny desktop window with your mouse cursor. Seriously, would it kill someone to make

the game expand to full screen? I'm going blind trying to play this. But I keep playing because I'm having so much fun.

NovaWare gives you six lives, and you need to make your way through a bunch of strange games like, say, popping all the zits on the photo of a kid. See how far you can get before running out of lives, and then, when carpal tunnel is just about to set in, upload your score to the Internet so you can brag about how much you must suffer from ADD.

I have an amazingly short attention span, so something like *NovaWare: Clicked!* is perfect for some...one...like...say, I think that I need to wash my Batman Underoos.

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM **LOW**



INDIE PICK OF THE MONTH

It's not free—but it's close enough!

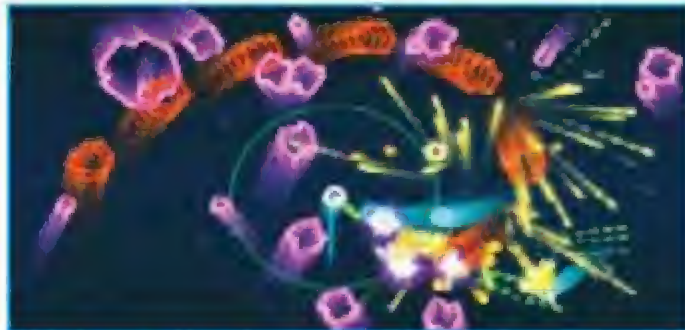


It's my solemn duty to remind you that, for all the freebies you glom from the Internet, gaming karma demands payment. Indie developers hope to eventually put some bread on the table, after all. So I've gotta single out yet another great game that's actually worth your money.

Designer Cliff Harris of Positech Games (<http://positech.co.uk>) has made a go of it with business/political simulation games in the past. He's taken on *Democracy* and given personality tests with *Kudos*—but now he's letting you plot the life of a *Rock Legend*.

Part sim, part RPG, and part tycoon game, *Rock Legend* is informal training for a career in the music business. You start as a dreamer cobbling together songs, and before long you're auditioning band members, negotiating contracts, and booking gigs. Hell, it even gets as specific as letting you set prices for concert T-shirts. My favorite parts: the minigames. One has you constructing songs by arranging notes on a music sheet. If you pair the right notes, you create better songs. Then, in practice sessions, it becomes a mini *Guitar Hero*. Kinda.

But it isn't just about leveling up your band and rocking out at progressively larger stadiums. You also need to figure out how to keep the band together. Each person has his own distinct personality that may conflict with others in the band—and may also inspire him to come up with some awesome lyrics. You just have to be careful who you let in. The only real downfall I've noticed is that some bandmates are superfickle and quit way too quickly. Or maybe they're trying to tell me something about my personal hygiene. If anyone gives me crap, I fire 'em. Or make 'em play the cowbell.




THE GAME: *Echoes*
FILE UNDER: *Asteroids at the club*

Is this some strange mishmash of *Geometry Wars* and countless other shooters? No, it's more like *Asteroids* hauled ass out to the club for a couple of Red Bull-and-vodkas, took "something" he shouldn't have, put on some cheap sunglasses, told a girl that he just met that he loved her, grabbed some munchies at a

White Castle, then threw up in the cab on the way home. Yeah, it's just like that. Want a more succinct description? Fine, let me just click the Instructions tab in the game:

- 10 Shoot Stuff
- 20 Die
- 30 Goto 10

Roger! *Echoes* also strips out one of the standard shooter conventions—that is, worrying about losing lives every five seconds—making for a very Zen experience. The mouse moves your shielded ship, the WASD keys control the direction your guns point, and the music—straight from Club Awesome—moves your ass. Makes me kinda afraid of the unlockable game called *Crack!* (No joke.)

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM  LOW



THE GAME: *Hurrican*
FILE UNDER: *Rock you like a Turrican*


You know what I like about superdope weapon-toting robotocymborgmen from the future? No catchy one-liners. Looking like an anorexic Cylon (the "toaster" bots, not the Grace Park/Tricia Helfer hottie hybrids), our hero crash-lands on some remote planet where you're mulching evil alien foliage, swatting metallic bugs, and powering up your weaponry. *Hurrican* is pretty simple—it is, after all, a running/jumping/shooting platformer—but the thing I appreciate most is that...hey! Are you

even paying attention to what I'm saying over here? Yeah, you!

You, the guy in the back scratching his head! Think this game sounds familiar? Y'know, you're not half the n00b I took you for—OK, maybe a third of the n00b. This is, in fact, a dandified modern remake of the shooter classic *Turrican*. Give that nerd a gold star! It's still a 2D game—just with more explosions than a crappy Michael Bay film (is there any other kind?) and a new coat of paint.

Honestly, there isn't a whole lot to say here. You run left and right, you jump, you power up weapons, and blast everything to hell. Seems straightforward enough for me.

The other big bonus (beyond the updated graphics and "free-ness") is that the game is open to modders. So go on and download it for a quick shooter fix. Want to pay it forward to the masses? Make and upload your own levels!

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM  LOW




THE GAME: *Masq*
FILE UNDER: *Choose your own mature adventure*

One of my first "gaming" experiences was *The Cave of Time*—a Choose Your Own Adventure book that had me flipping pages to see if I'd "won" and saved the universe or just blundered my way into a dead end. (Of course, it doesn't help that cheaters like me start at the back of the book.)

Masq is a Choose Your Own Adventure-style graphic novel in Flash form. And you don't want your mom/wife/girlfriend to catch you playing it.

Why's that? Well, it has some relatively racy themes. Let me put it this way: animated sexual innuendo. Lots. If you can't handle it, don't blame me. You've been warned. Hell, they pretty much say up front that this is "a steamy interactive drama." If you can get past that issue, the game is a fun (and very adult) experiment. A story plays out in front of you and the multiple choices of what you say steer where things go. Or don't. Be passive-aggressive—or just be lazy—and the story continues moving on without you.

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM  LOW



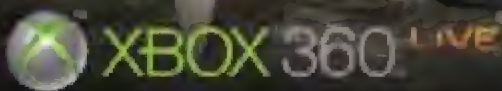
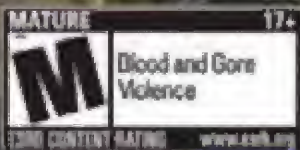
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• "Even when I wasn't playing *D&D*, I read through the *Monster Manual*," says producer John Garcia-Shelton. "That kinda puts me in a special category."

LEGENDARY: THE BOX

Hit or myth

PUBLISHER: Gamecock Media DEVELOPER: Spark Unlimited GENRE: First-Person Shooter RELEASE DATE: March 2008

PREVIEW

➔ It's fangs versus full metal jackets, a first-person shooter pitting primeval myth against modern man. In a way, *Legendary: The Box* producer John Garcia-Shelton can relate to this battle of old versus new. That's because he's fighting his own past.

We've all seen it—that conveniently placed machine-gun nest tempting you over. "You groan whenever you run across those blatant triggers," says Garcia-Shelton. "They tell the player: 'You went for the goodies—now you've gotta pay for 'em.' I've used these tricks," he confesses, "working on *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* games. If you walked up to a machine gun, we'd give you a line of guys to mow down." Time goes on; developers learn better ways to hide those triggers organically. Still, it's tough shaking that feeling that you're rolling through a Universal Studios tram ride.

On this point, Garcia-Shelton is adamant: "You can't have your game be that staged anymore. You can't punch scenes up prematurely or you'll

sacrifice gameplay. You can't direct this thing like a movie because you can't predict what the player is going to do once he enters this 3D space. Where's the middle ground?" He also admits that he still needs a few scripted sequences to show off *Legendary's* world-changing events. Take the first catastrophe, when a cat burglar inadvertently opens Pandora's box. The museum crumbles around you. After making a staged entrance, attacking griffons act as their A.I. dictates and not according to triggers.

In most first-person shooters, the SAW-toting soldier has the advantage of distance over melee-only monsters. Tacking extra health on creatures or using greater numbers is a cheap ploy and hardly conveys the tension Garcia-Shelton hopes to achieve. Therefore, to balance battles, the game's A.I. needs to employ tactics—a personality of sorts—true to each animal's nature. A werewolf, for example, needs to act like a brute and a pack hunter.

These beasts must also interact with the environment, following a believability chain of size, weight, and scale. A werewolf can't bash through a wall, but it will smash in a window,

jump through, leap onto a pillar, and grab something to throw at you before pouncing. A griffon will stab its beak through windows (like you see above), charge into doorways, and so on.

THE UNHOLY TRINITY

Beyond the mythological beasts, a paramilitary cabal known as the Black Order seeks Pandora's box. Great. So now you and the allies you make along the way must battle two distinct sets of A.I.—conventional human troops and an unconventional force of chaos.

Unlike *Half-Life 2's* antlions, *Legendary's* menagerie isn't controllable. You'll be in the midst of a cathedral firefight, using conventional tactics. Suddenly a griffon or werewolf—or god knows what else—can disrupt combat and go for the nearest target, sides be damned. This "combat triangle," as *Legendary's* developers put it, is what Garcia-Shelton thinks could help carve out a niche within FPS games both online and offline. So, for example, your standard *Legendary* deathmatch casts beasts as a third faction in every firefight. How do they affect your strategy as you're fighting someone else? Lure an "alpha werewolf" over to the enemy and have your teammates steer clear.

While developer Spark Unlimited isn't discussing *Legendary's* other multiplayer modes, Garcia-Shelton confirms that you won't control creatures directly. If there's a sequel, maybe they'll reconsider it. What matters most now is putting enough space between *Legendary* and the games he's already made. • **Darren Gladstone**

YOU AND THE ALLIES YOU MAKE ALONG THE WAY MUST BATTLE TWO DISTINCT SETS OF A.I.: CONVENTIONAL HUMAN TROOPS AND AN UNCONVENTIONAL FORCE OF CHAOS.



RANDOM ACCESS

10 things we're into this month



1 HIGHWAYMEN

It's *Lethal Weapon* pulp—a summer action flick, laid out in comic book form. *The Highwaymen*, a five-issue miniseries, takes place “a few years after tomorrow,” as two legendary secret agents pull out of retirement and land in the middle of a long-buried government secret. Can these AARP members still cut it? We haven't been this psyched for an action book since Andy Diggle's *The Losers*.

2 STROGASM

Are you blasting away at the *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* beta? The game is almost upon us and we recently tested out the bot A.I.—and it works well. Yes, those who fear online spankings will now get to bury their heads offline to battle bots. Or practice. A lot.



3 HEROES

You've watched the awesome first season of *Heroes*, right? No? The DVD set will get you up to speed in no time, sure, but we're dying to check out the 50 deleted scenes and unaired pilot episode. The only thing really missing is the sweet Web comics (find 'em at www.nbc.com/Heroes/novels).

4 GO-GO GADGET

Screw the iPhone! Ever wonder what tech editors use to write stories during the daily commute or press event? Glad you asked! Slide open the T-Mobile Wing's keyboard, type stories in Windows Mobile Word, and get Hotmail pushed to your phone. Then, on the odd occasion, savor the sweet irony as your phone crashes. Bonus!



5 IT'S A HIT!

Ages ago, when dinosaurs roamed the Earth, 3DO made *High Heat Baseball*—the quintessential ballgame for the PC. These days, we get nothing but tired bilge from EA's console ports. Well, *The Bigs* (Xbox 360, Wii, PS3, and PSP) gives hope. And after hearing rumors that 2K is staging a PC comeback in 2008, we're screwing on our rally caps.



6 WIIPC

A few months back (*GFW* #4, pg. 107), we drew up plans to hack your Wii Remote for PC use. Here's a more elegant solution: Logitech's MX Air, a wireless laser mouse with an accelerometer. Whasdatmean? It means you can use it on the desktop or point it in the air. Is FPS skeet shooting imminent? Kinda doubt it.

7 THE MEDIUM'S MESSAGE

This month's story on Ian Bogost and op-ed gaming get your attention (page 32)? Go to www.persuasivegames.com and check out some of their older titles like *Disaffected!* When you're done, pick up Bogost's book, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*.



8 JETS'N' GUNS

Talk about truth in advertising! If you're craving an arcade shooter, play *Jets'n'Guns*, which delivers 43 levels of gun-bristling plane battles. All it takes is 20 bucks and a trip to <http://jng.rakeingrass.com>.

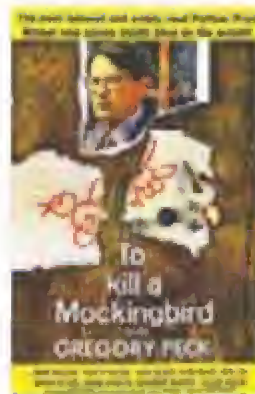


9 HOT FUZZ

This isn't so much a comedy as it is a bloody brilliant Brit homage to all those awesomely cheesy buddy cop flicks. If you liked *Shaun of the Dead*, watch this goofy love letter to all the *Point Breaks* and *Bad Boys* of the world.

10 VIRTUAL DATE NIGHT

Calling all gal-less gamers: Try playing *The Darkness* (PS3, Xbox 360) on those long, lonely nights. Early on, you can actually snuggle on the couch with your gal, watching Robert Mulligan's *To Kill a Mockingbird* on the TV...in the game. (Word has it other movies are hidden in the game: *Street Fighter*, *The Man with the Golden Arm*, and a *Flash Gordon* serial.)



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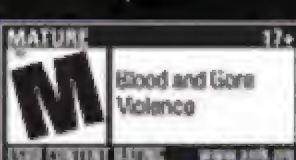


EPIC RPG ADVENTURE BOTH ONLINE AND OFF

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WORLD WARPER WRATH OF T



COVER FEATURE

 We're still playing far too much of *The Burning Crusade*—but, for some reason, Blizzard vice president of creative development Chris Metzen seems to be apologizing for it. “It had a lot of high-concept ideas, high-concept environments,” he says, calling to mind the psychedelic mushrooms of Zangarmarsh, the tragic majesty of Tempest Keep, “but other than some really nice moments, there was nothing really *personal* about it.” Never mind that MMOs are inherently aloof. Try as you might, you can't *really* personalize “killing” Illidan for the 17th time with 24 Ventrilo voices arguing over *Family Guy* reruns and whether the Crystal Spire of Karabor is meant for “Shammies” or “Pallies.”

Or can you? *Wrath of the Lich King*, the second *World of Warcraft* expansion, opens up the icy continent of Northrend in Azeroth and—if Metzen meets his new narrative goals—a moral can of worms for players. The story picks up the loose ends left by the *WarCraft III* expansion *The Frozen Throne* (“It’s an indirect sequel,” says Metzen), as the Alliance and the Horde set sail to deal with a menace they’ve left unchecked for far too long: Arthas Menethil, once the noble crown prince of Lordaeron and Paladin of the Silver Hand—now the all-powerful Lich King, bent on turning the entire world into an army of zombie slaves. And he could, if he so chose—push the figurative button, and every man, woman, and child in the world would be part of his army of the damned. So what’s stopping him, really?

“Arthas thinks it’d be funny if we all did it for him,” says Metzen, hinting that the quest chains, the dungeon crawls, and the narrative hooks of *Wrath* may all just be part of Arthas’ master plan. “He fought the good fight, fought as hard as he could, and ultimately he went nuts up in the far north. And the bad guy used him as the hammer. The bad guy sent him home to kill his dad and kill his people...and loose the Plague on everything he ever fought to protect. And all these crusading heroes, with all their epic gear and all their good intentions and all their nobility and all that horses***, flood into the far north...and he’s pretty much [there to] reel ‘em in.”

The idea’s certainly an enticing one. And as quick as Metzen is to point out that “this ain’t Shakespeare,” there’s definitely something literate here: a narrative nod to the fact that in MMOs, the designers really *are* pulling the strings. “We want to add some layers of psychology that put you in strange moral situations of how you fight the good fight that mimic some of Arthas’ own experiences.... By the time you reach level 80 [the expansion’s new level cap], by the time you stand toe-to-toe with this bastard, do you still have your pretty principles and highfalutin morality, or is it a mirror reflection? Arthas is after that as much as global domination. It’s a hook that makes it personal that *Burning Crusade* didn’t have.”

And it’s not just quest text and WoWWiki entries that support the notion. A new Caverns of Time instance based on Arthas’ infamous culling of Stratholme (see pg. 63) lets you literally follow in his footsteps, and *WOW*’s first Hero Class—the Death Knight (see pg. 64)—lets you play as the anti-Paladin archetype that Arthas made infamous. >

Get out your frost-resist gear—Arthas is coming

BY SEAN MOLLOY

OFF AFT: THE LICH KING

NORTHREND'S ZONES

For the moment, Northrend is split into 10 zones (boundaries and level ranges are subject to change). Enter through Howling Fjord or Borean Tundra in the eastern bay or on the western point, and fight your way to Icecrown Glacier, where Arthas' Frozen Throne waits. *Wrath of the Lich King* also introduces a couple new zone concepts: Lake Wintergrasp is *WOW's* first outdoor PVP zone, and Azjol-Nerub, home of the spiderlike Nerubian race, is the first "outdoor underground" zone—a cave under the heart of Northrend, vast enough to house massive structures and cities. The full (but tentative) list:

- Howling Fjord (level 68–72)
- Borean Tundra (level 68–72)
- The Dragonblight (level 71–75)
- Zul'Drak (level 73–76)
- Grizzly Hills (level 74–76)
- Azjol-Nerub (level 74–78)
- Sholazar Basin (level 75–78)
- The Storm Peaks (level 77–80)
- Icecrown Glacier (level 77–80)
- Lake Wintergrasp (Outdoor PVP)



• More than just ice and snow.

THE GLACIERS OF NOR

Unlike Outland, no great Dark Portal opens up to grant you entry into Northrend—the day the expansion comes out, players level 68 and higher will simply be able to hop on a boat and sail north to the harsh new frontier.

And while we're used to Outland's surreal alien landscapes and Netherstorms, the thought of grinding from 70 to 80 on glaciers and permafrost leave us—and Blizzard—more than a bit cold.

"We wanted to make it really clear to players right off the bat that just because we're doing Northrend you're not going to play through all ice and snow zones," says lead level designer Cory Stockton. "When you go from zone to zone, they don't all need to look like Winterspring...they all need to have a different look and feel. Obviously, snow is a huge part of Northrend, but there are still ways to break that up for the players without just doing a whole bunch of icy zones." So while

gray and white will certainly be among *Wrath of the Lich King's* primary colors, you can expect some variety—burning forests, magical points of ancient power, and ruins of civilizations long thought lost. "It doesn't feel alien like Outland," says lead game designer Tom Chilton, "but it has its own character visually. The way we do these cliffs [is] different [from] the way we do cliffs in the Old World...throughout Northrend you'll see visual elements that are unique and different."

The new continent will be slightly larger than Outland, though the landmass is divided into more zones. "One of the things we're *not* doing this time is adding a playable race," says senior producer J. Allen Brack, leaving more bandwidth for a larger endgame area. For transportation, a series of seaports connect points along the lower shore of Northrend, with boats leaving regularly to take you from one end of the continent to

the other. The usual flight points will shuttle you between friendly cities you've already visited, but how flying mounts earned in Outland fit into Northrend is still up in the air.

"We're still discussing how that's going to work," says Chilton. "We're not sure if you'll actually be able to use your flying mount right away. You might have to earn your 'Northrend flying badge' at a later level...learn how to defrost the wings, ya know? And whaddya know, you can only do that at, oh, level 78." While denying a privilege (even for a little while) that took some folks—especially those who dropped a small fortune on epic flyers—months to earn will undoubtedly outrage some players, for the designers, it's a necessary evil.

"It's fairly important to us when we introduce a new area that we're able to use level design to flow you from one place to another," says

ON UPGRADES AND LEVEL CURVES

"The guiding principle is that it should never feel like you're grinding," says lead game designer Tom Chilton of *Wrath's* ascent to level 80. "You should never run out of quest content. We don't expect it to be drastically different from what 60 to 70 was like." And despite complaints from the early days of *Burning Crusade*, even the most epically geared players should be getting new gear from almost the start.

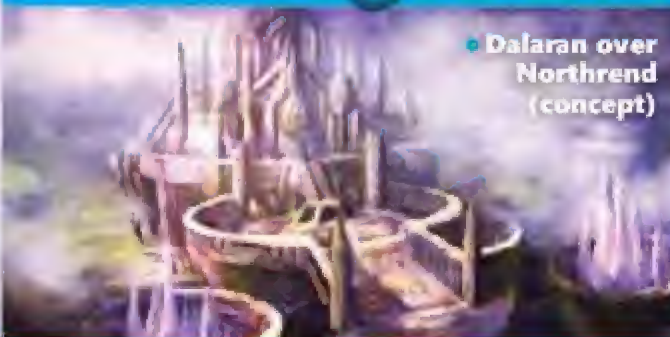
"The hardcore resent that at first," says Chilton, "but it's only a matter of time before they start getting into the endgame again."

• Prepare to kill Northrend-native (and Scourge-aligned) Vrykul by the thousands.

WHAT'RE THEY BUILDING IN THERE?



• Dalaran today



• Dalaran over Northrend (concept)

One of *WOW's* great mysteries will soon be solved: Just what the hell have those wizards been doing inside the sealed-off purple dome of Dalaran? Turns out they were prepping Azeroth's de facto capital of arcanum for a move to Northrend—or, more accurately, to the skies above it—where it will serve as the Shattrath of *Wrath of the Lich King*, the major hub city for Horde and Alliance alike.

The reborn Dalaran will contain an instanced dungeon or two, similar to *Ragefire Chasm* in *Orgrimmar* or the *Stockade* in *Stormwind*, and players will likely be able to use portals to reach any of the Old World's main cities (*Stormwind*, *Thunder Bluff*, and so on)—and possibly even *Shattrath*. However, don't expect to see any auction houses or class trainers hiding in Dalaran's halls.

"That's one of those important circulation techniques," says lead game designer Tom Chilton. "We want players to have reasons to go back to the Old World. We don't want places like *Stormwind* to feel like a ghost town—they're supposed to be bustling cities."



• A cold frontier: The Alliance set up new encampments (with new building models) in the north.

THREND

Cold country

Chilton. "There are gameplay reasons to restrict your methods of travel. But it's not like your flying mount became useless...you're not going to have to pay 5,000 gold again to ride it."

And when you can't go overland? Go under, through the underground cavern of *Azjol-Nerub*, home of the spiderlike Nerubian race that was one of the first to succumb en masse to *Arthas' Scourge* (old-school *WarCraft* players know them as *Crypt Fiends* and *Crypt Lords*). "It's going to be exterior terrain, but underground," says Stockton of *World of Warcraft's* first subterranean zone. "It'll feel like you're in a cave, but it'll be gigantic. Buildings, temples—a look and feel very similar to *Naxxramas*, since [the Nerubians] are where the Scourge stole that architecture from."

"There are still pockets of Nerubians down there literally fighting for their lives," adds Metzen, spilling that not every Nerubian heeds the call of

the Lich King. "And we have a number of plans about how they play into things. What are they about? Are they principled, or even worse in some ways than the Scourge itself?"

Northrend will also play host to *WOW's* first-ever outdoor PVP zone, *Lake Wintergrasp*, a (completely optional) center of Horde-versus-Alliance combat in the middle of the continent, which Chilton describes as a sort of noninstanced Battleground with destructible buildings—and siege weapons for destroying them. "We're building different siege weapons for different races," says Chilton. "Meat Wagons, Steam Tanks, all that sort of stuff—and we intend for them to have slightly different game mechanics..."

"The siege weapons don't move at a really high velocity," he continues, meaning a Steam Tank will be no substitute for a mount when trying to traverse the zone. "We want to encourage people

to fight still," says Stockton. "We don't want them in the siege weapons the entire time." Cooperative driver/gunner mechanics were discussed but then quickly dismissed as a likely bore for either party.

"The two outdoor PVP concepts we felt really worked in *The Burning Crusade* were the *Auchindoun* spirit tower mechanic and the *Halaal Nagrand* PVP," says Chilton. PVP objectives completed in *Lake Wintergrasp* will have far-reaching world effects: Capture a specific point, for example, and your faction will receive a long-lasting buff that provides a worthwhile, but not necessarily essential, benefit. (Think *Auchindoun's* PVP spirit towers, which, when captured, allowed players in dungeons to collect special spirit shards from downed bosses.) "One of the things we liked about *Auchindoun* PVP was it lasted a significant amount of time," adds Stockton. "Six hours, so when you put in the commitment, it was there." >

A TALE OF TWO CITADELS

"We kind of learned with Hellfire Peninsula in *Burning Crusade* that we didn't want to bring everyone into one zone," says lead level designer Cory Stockton, memories of day-one Outland horrors still fresh. "So with Northrend you're going to have a choice when you start to come in on either of the two sides of the continent—and have two completely different starting experiences for the same level range." In the west: Borean Tundra. In the east: Howling Fjord.



• Sharp contrast: Concept art for Grizzly Hills (left) displays Northrend's ecological diversity.



WESTERN ZONE: BOREAN TUNDRA

This flat, sprawling zone would be filled with snow from seashore to its most inland borders—if it weren't for those dang Naga.

"They're always draining water," laughs lead game designer Tom Chilton,

referring to the latest Naga scheme to melt all of the snow and ice in Borean and use it for some nefarious purpose. Half the zone is iced over, while the other half consists of semicircular pools of meltwater. "It's sort of like with Terokkar Forest, where you have the Bone Wastes to break it up."

The main inhabitants are a race of walruslike people called the Tuskarr—nomadic, tribal folk whose homes and structures (which often resemble fish or whales) are attached to giant tusklike sliders so they can move their villages wherever they need to. Whether or not that means Darkmoon Faire-style migration (here one day, gone another), Blizzard won't say.

Borean Tundra will also house a giant Horde citadel—the largest in Northrend (current name: "Awesome...Horde...Base," says Chilton. "Chris Metzen probably has a list 300 items long of things we need names for," laughs Stockton)—as well as one of the most magical spots in all of Azeroth: The Nexus.

WESTERN INSTANCE: THE NEXUS

Both of Northrend's starter zones will contain a winged instance similar to Hellfire Citadel, with one "beginner" dungeon wing, a higher-end dungeon wing, and a raid wing. Near Borean Tundra lies The Nexus, an instance hub and ancient home of the Blue Dragonflight, keepers of the world's magic.

"After all these years Malygos [long-slumbering leader of the Blue Dragonflight] sees magic out of control across the globe," says Metzen. "Whoa, societies of wizards—are they crazy? Don't they know that demon armies invade places when you do this?" So Malygos and the Blue Dragonflight are going to declare war on magic—if you practice magic, you've gotta go.

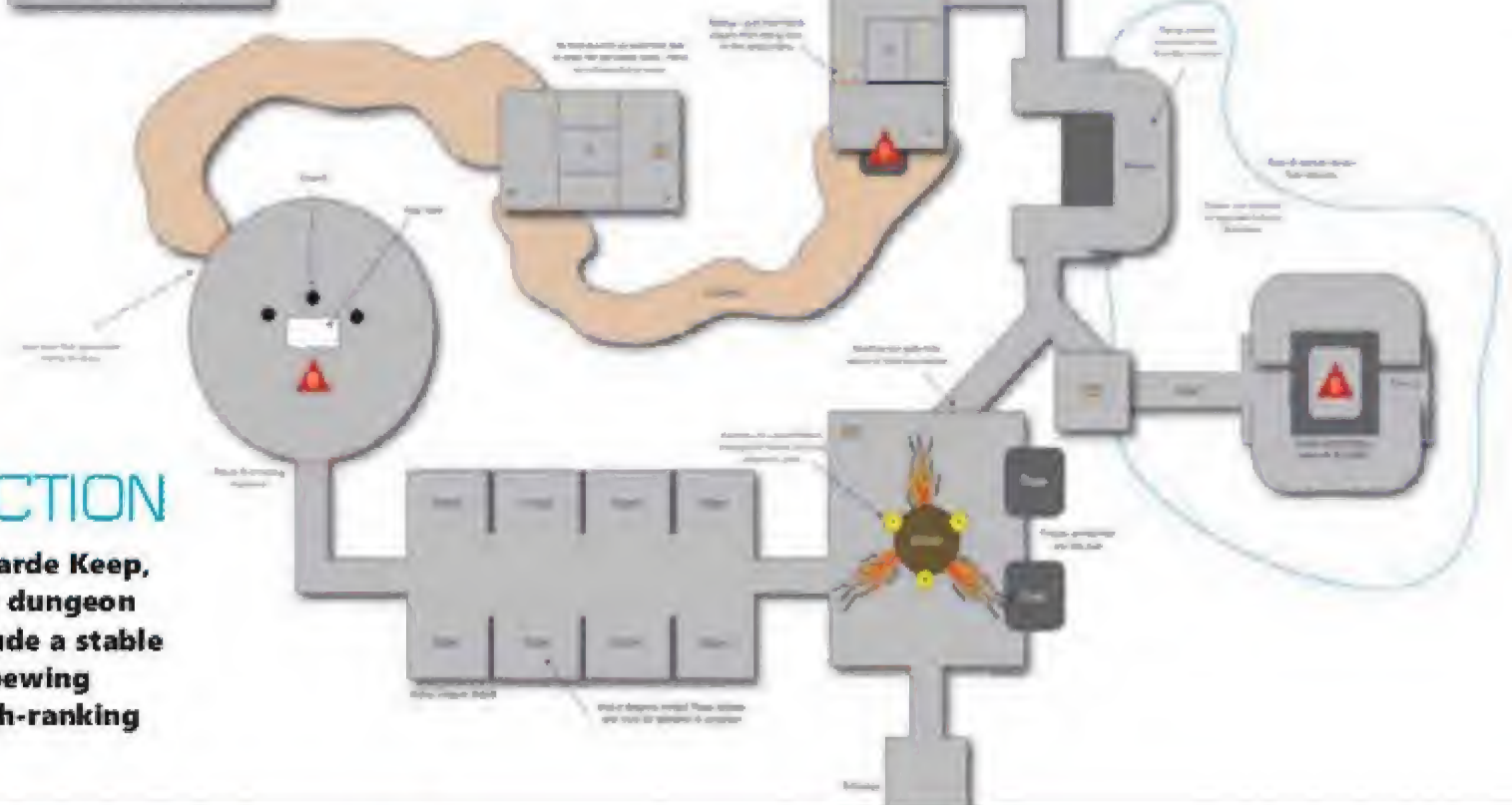
Acolytes of Malygos prepare for their arcane inquisition on the floating rings of the Nexus—summoned into place piece-by-piece by Malygos—where instance-goers will play out their adventure. The final raid wing will likely culminate in a fight with half-mad Malygos himself. "I wouldn't call him evil—but he's definitely gone off the deep end," says Metzen. "We'll have to dispense some indiscriminate justice."



Northrend's starting zones and dungeons



Valgarde 70 Dungeon
Updated 4.3.07



UNDER CONSTRUCTION

An early (and unfinished) map of Utgarde Keep, the first instance wing of the Utgarde dungeon hub in Howling Fjord. Highlights include a stable of protodragons, a demonic, flame-spewing forge, and three boss battles with high-ranking Utgarde overlords.



3

• Cliffs rise like fortress walls; rivers and waterfalls leave long, jagged scars. It's a good place for a war.

EASTERN ZONE: HOWLING FJORD

If you're averse to seeing snow the second you set foot in Northrend, you might want to set sail to Valgarde, one of the starting settlements in Howling Fjord, *Wrath of the Lich King's* easternmost zone.

Norse themes dominate: Metal-wrought structures shaped like Viking warships loom on the high, sharp cliff tops, overlooking the newly built Alliance settlements (expect to see new building models for old standbys like inns, a nice change after seeing Old World Alliance structures popping up everywhere in alien Outland)—and 15-foot-tall, protodragon-riding barbarians called the Vrykul bear more than a passing resemblance to Eric the Red and his ilk.

Despite the fact that the other indigenous people of Northrend are just now starting to see the Vrykul appear, these newcomers are actually some of Northrend's oldest residents. "They're ill-tempered to the extreme," says Metzen. "No one knows what to make of these guys, but they're megapowerful."

With *Wrath*, Blizzard plans on incorporating more of what they call "micros"—dungeonlike underground (or otherwise internal) areas that aren't instanced, but play out more like a traditional dungeon crawl. One such micro called Gjalerbron finds the Vrykul working side-by-side with Liches—meaning the Vrykul are probably not going to be easily swayed to your side. "They weren't necessarily always this evil," says Stockton, "but they've been hearing the call of the Lich King—and you can only fight against that for so long."

EASTERN INSTANCE: UTGARDE

The eastern equivalent of the Nexus, Utgarde is a citadel owned and operated by Northrend's native Vrykul—and it serves as a hub for Howling Fjord's instanced dungeons and raids. The first dungeon, the three-boss Utgarde Keep, is comparable to Hellfire Ramparts in both look and length.

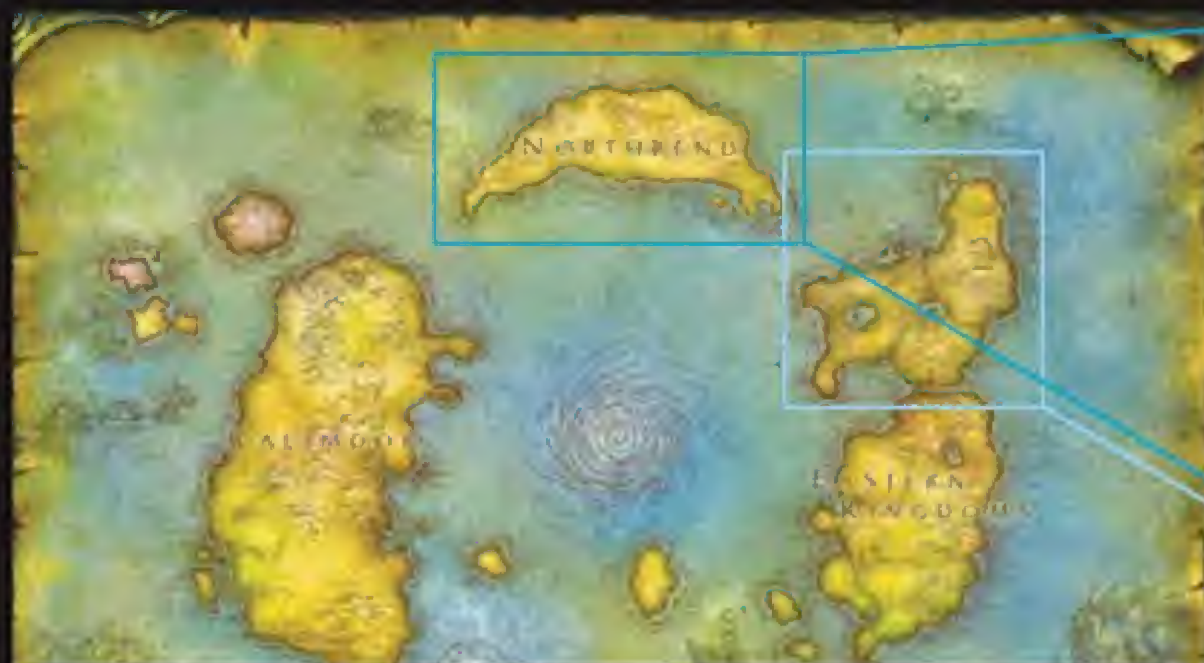
With *Wrath of the Lich King's* dungeons, Blizzard plans on adding more "memorable moments"—to continue to break up the pull-rest-pull-boss structure that original 5-mans such as Scholomance adopted. One point of interest in Utgarde Keep: a giant flame-spewing skull forge. Step in the flames, and you'll die—but kill the Vrykul workers operating the bellows, and the flames die down, allowing you and your party to pass. Later in the dungeon, Blizzard plans a frantic "gauntlet run" similar to the one in Hellfire Ramparts' Shattered Halls.

While the Vrykul-allied Lich King hordes don't play a huge part in Utgarde Keep's trash pulls, they're pervasive in the boss fights: One boss is a Lich; another is a Vrykul who summons Scourge slaves to do some dirty ditch-digging for him. >



4

PATH OF THE LICH KING



• Arthas' life story is set mainly around Lordaeron and Northrend.

Blizzard lorekeeper Chris Metzen once called Illidan the Boba Fett of *World of Warcraft* villainy. We suppose that would make Arthas Menethil the Darth Vader. If you're unfamiliar with Arthas' arc from noble Paladin to terrible Lich King (as told in *WarCraft III* and *The Frozen Throne*), gather 'round and geek out on some good ol' fashioned lore.



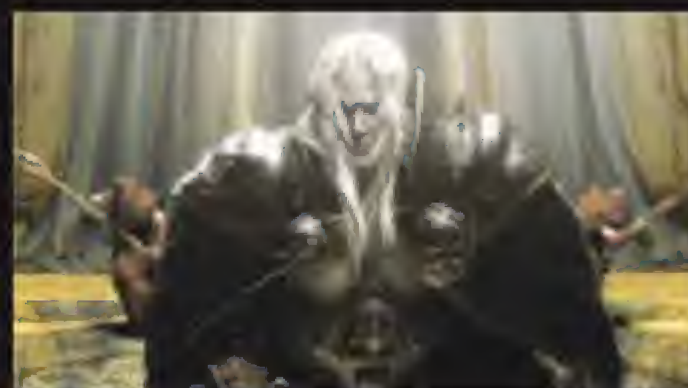
1) WARNING SIGNS

The prophet Medivh appeared before various leaders of the world—including King Terenas Menethil II of Lordaeron, father of the headstrong young Paladin Arthas—to warn of a coming plague...and advise them all to rally in the continent of Kalimdor.



4) THE CULLING OF STRATHOLME

Arthas arrived in the great city of Stratholme, but he was too late: The grain had been distributed, and it was only a matter of time before Stratholme's sleeping citizens would turn undead. Arthas ordered his Paladin mentor, Uther, to help him purge the town by slaying the inhabitants in their sleep, but the older Paladin would have nothing to do with Arthas' slaughter—and so Uther left with Jaina at his side. Arthas, however, had no such qualms. In *Wrath of the Lich King*, you'll get to relive this defining moment in a Caverns of Time instance (see pg. 63).



6) HOME AGAIN

After months in the frozen north, Arthas returned home to Lordaeron, knelt before his father in the throne room—and then murdered him, claiming the throne for himself.



2) A CALL TO ARMS

Word came to Arthas of the northland plague as the young Paladin was defending the town of Strahnbrad from marauding Orcs. After dealing with the Horde threat, he and his main squeeze, the sorceress Jaina Proudmoore, went to investigate the strange disease.

3) ALAS, ANDORHAL

After learning that the Necromancer Kel'Thuzad had infected Andorhal's grain supply with the plague and shipped it off to nearby towns, Arthas killed Kel'Thuzad—and set off to stop the tainted grain from spreading.



5) TO NORTHBEND

Arthas followed the Scourge leader Mal'ganis to Northrend and met up with his old friend Muradin Bronzebeard, who was hunting for the fabled runeblade Frostmourne. Upon finding the cursed blade, Arthas claimed it for himself, killing Muradin in the process. Arthas slew Mal'ganis—and the mad voice of the Lich King filled Arthas' head.



8) THE DESTRUCTION OF DALARAN

Recently undead Kel'Thuzad helped Arthas fulfill the Lich King's plan to bring the Burning Legion into Azeroth by summoning one of their commanders—Archimonde—into the world. Archimonde destroyed the great city of Dalaran with a single spell...and then revealed he no longer had use for the Lich King or his lackeys.

The tragic tale of Arthas Menethil



9) HOME AGAIN (AGAIN)

Arthas returned to Lordaeron—but he was betrayed by Sylvanas, who claimed Lordaeron (now Undercity) for her own. Arthas fled to Northrend, following his master's call to protect the Frozen Throne.

10) WELCOMING PARTY

After a scuffle with the Blood Elf prince Kael'thas (understandably upset over the Sunwell incident), Arthas descended into Azjol-Nerub, home of the Nerubians—where he was ambushed by followers of his old friend Muradin. Arthas escaped thanks to Anub'arak, former king of Azjol-Nerub.



11) ARTHAS, LICH KING

After defeating Illidan at the foot of Icecrown Glacier, Arthas ascended the icy peak, shattered the Frozen Throne, and donned the helmet of the Lich King, fusing with the ancient being (the tortured spirit of an Orc Shaman named Ner'zhul—but that's another story).

Darth Vader's story ends in redemption—but what about poor old Arthas? "We don't want it to be predictable," says Metzen. "We don't want it to play like, 'Yeah, that's pretty much what I expected.'" >



CAVERNS OF TIME: STRATHOLME

Blizzard will be adding a new instance to the Caverns of Time, the dungeon in Tanaris that lets players actively participate in some famous (and infamous) moments in *WarCraft* history. The latest instance will let you follow in the footsteps of Arthas as he slaughters the town of Stratholme—and, if other Caverns of Time instances are any indication, your goal won't be to stop him, but to make sure he finishes his task. Morally oogy, yes—but how far is too far?

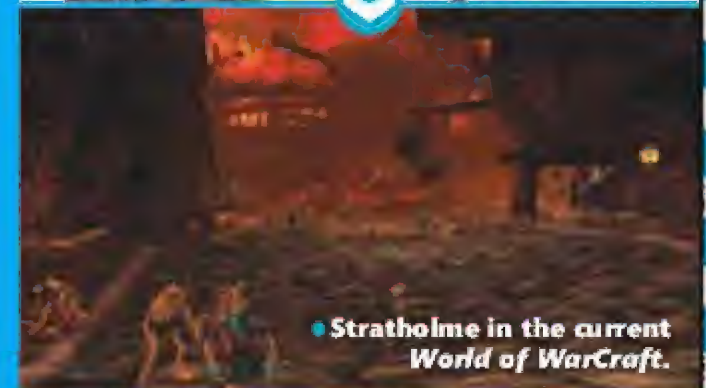
"It's the same kind of problem as in *WarCraft III*," says Metzen, who admits he hasn't figured out the exact mechanics of the encounter. "My first pitch for the [WC3] mission was that they weren't plagued yet—so it's kind of a design dilemma. We don't want to have players feel dirty....we don't want to put players in the situation where they're hurting innocent people arbitrarily."

Arthas' appearance in the Caverns of Time won't be an isolated event. "We wish we [had] involved Illidan a bit more in the quest process from level 60 to 70," says lead game designer Tom Chilton. And so Arthas—more than just a raid boss—will check in on players repeatedly as they quest their way to level 80.

"When is a game more than a game?" says Metzen. "When it's making you feel creepy or



Stratholme in *WarCraft III*.



Stratholme in the current *World of Warcraft*.

related or heroic—it's not just a mechanical experience of clicking and looting and killing and raiding. We want to provide as much context and fiction and psychology as possible, at least the first time—you'll probably roll this dungeon 80 times—but the first time was a hoot!" A morally oogy hoot.

Before becoming an all-powerful being of horrific evil, Arthas was a mere Death Knight.

THE DEATH KNIGHT

Introducing *World of Warcraft's* first Hero Class

World of Warcraft's first new class is also its first-ever Hero Class—though the implementation may not be exactly what you were expecting.

"One of the ideas we had for the Death Knight was that you'd convert your character into a Death Knight," says lead game designer Tom Chilton. "That you would stop being a level 80 Mage or whatever and become a Death Knight. But when we were running that around the team, it was too common a sentiment to feel like, well, I don't *want* to lose my existing character. What I'm going to *actually* do is create a level 1 Hunter that I intend to turn into a Death Knight, and power him to level 80...and this would become a weird hoop you were going to have to jump through."

So instead, you unlock the ability to create a Death Knight by finishing a quest chain—comparable in difficulty to the Warlock's epic mount quest—with any of your existing level 80 characters, at which point you can make an entirely new, wholly separate Hero Class character starting somewhere close to level 60 (the exact number hasn't been decided). "Some ideas that are still under consideration are that you'd start in Stratholme and have to break your way out of there," says Chilton. "Maybe you've come to your senses and said, 'Wait, I don't *want* to serve the Lich King.'"

Mechanically, the plate-wearing Death Knight fills a hybrid DPS (damage per second)/tanking role ("People are always looking for tanks and healers," says Chilton), though they have no mana, rage, or energy bar. Instead, Death Knights have a "rune sword" interface element beneath their health that displays six different runes of three different types—Blood, Frost, and Unholy—that you can mix and match whenever you're not in combat. Different Death Knight spells and abilities require different numbers of runes, and using a spell darkens the required runes for a set cooldown time. An ability called Army of Dead, for example, summons a small army of undead to pull aggro—and that might

require one Unholy rune. Death and Decay, an area-effect spell Blizzard is planning, may require one Unholy and one Blood.

"The current idea we're playing with is you have a fixed time, say 10 seconds, for a rune to fade back in and become usable again," says Chilton. "And there are potentially things you can do to speed that up or immediately light up runes. We have this one idea for an ability called Blood Boil—it's a damage-over-time ability, and after the end of the duration, it lights up two of your Blood runes."

In general, Blood abilities are damage-oriented, Frost is control-oriented, and Unholy contains utility and damage-over-time mechanics, but that's not a hard and fast rule. "We don't want to pigeonhole it to the point where when you're tanking you use all Frost runes, or when you're DPSing you use all blood runes.... There are inherently good reasons to use a mix, and even if you have at least one rune type on the bar, you'll have access to all your abilities should it become necessary."

What we still don't know: what talents they'll have, what races you can be, or whether you'll be able to make multiple Death Knights across multiple servers by completing the quest just once. But the Death Knight—and likely any other Hero Classes Blizzard introduces later—won't be more powerful than the existing classes...just different. An advanced alt, sans low-level grinding.

ENDGAME OF THE LICH KING

"Karazhan was one of the more successful pieces of content we ever put in the game," says senior producer J. Allen Brack. So Blizzard is planning more 10-man raids (in addition to the more hardcore 25-man raids).

"We don't have current plans to do heroic level 80 versions of Outland or Old World dungeons," says Chilton. "We're at peace with obsoleting content. People really enjoyed it. Sometimes it's just time to move on."

Blizzard does, however, plan to continue adding more "modlike" functionality to the game, including an in-game substitute for Item Rack (a mod that lets you define sets of gear for different purposes) and bosses that telegraph their moves more clearly, hopefully eliminating the need for "boss helper" mods.

ZUL'AMAN

Designed to be the next step for 10-man raid teams after Karazhan, Zul'AMAN is an outdoor instance in the Ghostlands, on the outskirts of Blood Elf territory. It's home to the Forest Trolls and, like 20-man raid instance Zul'Gurub, contains a number half-Troll/half-animal hybrid bosses for your raid to battle. After taking down the first four, you can make your way to Forest Troll leader Zul'jin, who's been exploiting animal spirits for his own twisted purposes.

Zul'AMAN ditches the usual reputation-reward system in favor of a timed challenge not unlike the infamous 45-minute Baron Run of Stratholme. Bosses drop their usual loot—but if you manage to clear the first four within a set (and extremely taxing) time limit, you'll gain access to a special cache of extra-good gear.

**PRIOR TO WRATH****The Burning Crusade ain't over yet**

Before folks can even get on a boat to Northrend, Blizzard has a couple *Burning Crusade*-related loose ends to tie up. They come in the form of two raid dungeons: the 10-man Zul'AMAN and the 25-man Sunwell Plateau, both coming in separate content patches some time in the near future.



Sunwell Plateau uses architecture from Silvermoon City (pictured).

NEW PROFESSION: INSCRIPTION

Burning Crusade introduced Jewelcrafting, which allowed players to customize their gear; *Wrath's* new profession, Inscription, lets you customize the abilities and skills in your spellbook. "You're permanently changing your spell kit," says lead game designer Tom Chilton. "You might find a couple different recipes to inscribe your Fireball with increased crit chance, or increased damage, or faster cast time, or lower mana cost—so it's almost like a talent system within the profession system. Only it's more based around choices you make for an individual spell rather than affecting your character as a whole." Unlike Enchanters, Inscribers will be able to sell physical product (creating tradeable "scrolls," for example, from ink, paper, and other reagents). Only a handful of core spells will be customizable in this fashion—don't expect to extend the range of your Priest's Mind Vision; do expect to extend the duration of your Hunter's Freezing Trap.

SUNWELL PLATEAU

"There's a hook of *The Burning Crusade* that we never got to," says Metzen. "We never really had that final 'yeah, we kicked their ass; we ended the Burning Crusade; we saved the universe.' You kick Illidan's ass—but he's not a fan of the Burning Crusade either. I don't know that we said everything we set out to say. Sunwell Plateau lets us end the sentence, at least."

On an island North of Silvermoon City, the Blood Elves toil away trying to reignite the source of their ancient power—the Sunwell—with crates of energy ported in from Netherstorm by Prince Kael'thas (turns out that's what the mana forges were for). Unfortunately, rebuilding the Sunwell is just an elaborate excuse to bring Legion lieutenant Kil'jaeden—right-hand man of big baddie Sargeras and creator of the Lich King—into the Old World from Outland. In game terms, this amounts to one last 25-man raid—the Naxxramas of *The Burning Crusade*—for players before Arthas is let loose.

"This is something [lead game designer] Jeff [Kaplan] and I wanted to do ever since Silvermoon," says lead level designer Cory Stockton, "because Silvermoon's art assets are so insanely gorgeous." Inside the shining red-and-gold walls of the Sunwell structure, expect tweaker Blood Elves, high on magic, and anywhere from six to eight bosses. At the end, you'll take on Kil'jaeden himself—something that, in the grand scheme of *World of Warcraft* lore, 25 level 70 characters shouldn't really be able to do.

"You have to rationalize a lot of things," says Metzen. Sunwell Plateau's requisite disbelief suspension: The whole thing only works because Kil'jaeden's just a half-formed abomination, stuck in the middle of some twisted birthing canal. •

More *Wrath* goods online, including a report from BlizzCon and a gallery of screenshots of Northrend's various zones. Visit GFW10.1UP.com.

**XTRAS**

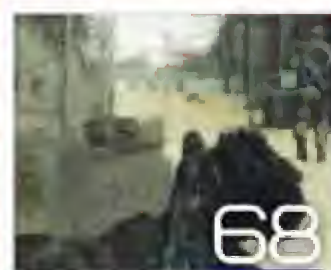


Reviews

Opinions you can trust

• *Beyond the Sword*
ain't your everyday
Civilization expansion



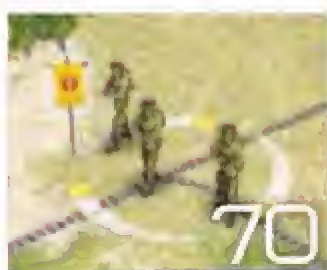


FIRE

Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2

Good game...bad A.I.

68



FIGHT

Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword

The best *Civilization IV* expansion yet.

70



SCORE

Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved

The casual console hit comes to Steam.

71

THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS...

Y It's around this time every year that many of us in the gaming press (myself included) feel compelled to complain about how we just don't get enough quality games during the summer months. But I'm here to tell you that's simply not the case. Why, looking over the stacks of unopened PC game boxes I have sitting here on my desk at this very moment, I see: *Sims 2: H&M Fashion Stuff*, two copies of *Sims 2: Celebration! Stuff*, two copies of *Scratches: Director's Cut*, two copies of *The Secrets of Atlantis*, and *Carol Vorderman's Sudoku*. I'm sure you agree that *this* is the pinnacle of PC gaming.

Quake Wars—who needs it? *Tabula Rasa*—whatever! And *Hellgate: London*—you can keep it. I've got a budget sudoku game, a rerelease of a dumb adventure game, and two *Sims 2* content-patches-in-boxed-form to waste away those unbearably hot summer days. Thank you, game publishers, for listening to our endless pleas for quality midyear releases.

(Sarcasm aside, summer 2007 actually ain't too bad for PC gamers—we're getting eagerly awaited stuff like *BioShock*, *Two Worlds*, and *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2*. Still, this should serve as a general reminder to lazy publishers everywhere!) • **Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor**



SCORE KEY

GFW uses a 10-point scoring scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a game is worth your hard-earned money. We strictly enforce a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any game receiving a score of 6+ is certainly worth playing—at least to some extent. Here's how the numbers break down:



Editors' Choice award

Any game scoring a 9 or higher receives a GFW Editors' Choice award, signifying the very best in PC gaming.



9-10: Excellent

Genre benchmarks—universally recommended.

7-8.5: Good

Enjoyable throughout, with minor flaws.

5-6.5: Average

Status quo. Only genre enthusiasts need apply.

3-4.5: Bad

Significant bugs or fundamental design issues.

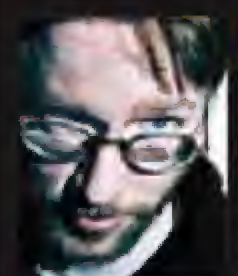
0-2.5: Terrible

Never should have been made.

MEET THE CREW



The Review Crew is the IUP Network's ensemble cast of game critics from all of our print and online publications. We believe that games are more than the sum of their parts, so we tackle them subjectively, as *experiences*.



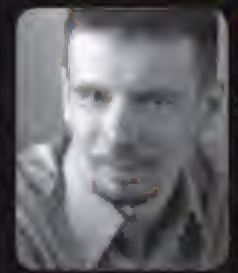
RYAN SCOTT

REVIEWS EDITOR

Resident übergeek and GFW reviews overlord Ryan Scott splits his free time between comics, rampant *Last* speculation, and way too many MMORPGs.

Current Faves: *The Lord of the Rings Online*, *World of Warcraft*

IUP.com Blog: [GFWRyan.IUP.com](#)



BRUCE GERYK

STAFF REVIEWER

Crack neurosurgeon by day and GFW reviewer/columnist by night, Bruce is our go-to guy for all those hex-based games that us young folk don't understand.

Current Faves: *Carriers at War*, cross-country neurosurgery training

IUP.com Blog: [grognaards.IUP.com](#)



GORD GOBLE

STAFF REVIEWER

Don't let Gord's cool, James Bond-like exterior fool you—inside him beats the heart of a hopeless hardware nerd and racing-game guru.

Current Faves: *Test Drive Unlimited*, *DiRT* (the console version, anyway)

IUP.com Blog: [gordholio.IUP.com](#)



ERIC NEIGHER

STAFF REVIEWER

A hotshot lawyer by day, Eric started gaming at 6 years old...and over 21 years later, his parents still limit his gaming time to two hours a day.

Current Faves: *Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*

IUP.com Blog: [TheFrimFramSauce.IUP.com](#)



MATT PECKHAM

STAFF REVIEWER

If Matt Peckham were a war game, he'd have six sides, slide around on a little piece of plastic, take everything by turns, and smell like old glue.

Current Faves: *IL-2 Sturmovik: 1946*, *Final Fantasy I* (PSP)

IUP.com Blog: [mattpeckham.IUP.com](#)



JOE RYBICKI

STAFF REVIEWER

Official PlayStation Magazine alum Joe is now a rogue agent, ready to champion the cause of the innocent in a world of criminals who operate *above the law*.

Current Faves: *PQ2: Practical Intelligence Quotient*, *Cooking Mama: Cook Off*

IUP.com Blog: [OPMJoer.IUP.com](#)



Head to [ReviewCrew.IUP.com](#) to meet all of the IUP Network's expert reviewers.



• Beasley will proceed to get hung up behind the support beam for the rest of the level.

GHOST RECON: ADVANCED WARFIGHTER 2

Get by with a little help from your friends—very little

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **GRIN** GENRE: **Tactical First-Person Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (www.ubi.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-32 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

Y Sherman said, "War is hell." Sartre said, "Hell is other people." *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2* is what happens when the two get together.

The problem is this: Your three squadmates are, in short, shockingly stupid. It's not just that they blithely run, one after the other, directly into the path of a machine-gun nest; it's not even that they report "I'm taking fire!" and then seem utterly unwilling to do anything with this information. No, the problem is that they lack the most rudimentary navigational skills—and I'm not talking about backwoods survival training here, but rather sufficient navigational skill to *walk around a parked automobile*. This awful pathfinding A.I. means that these highly trained special forces are all but useless except as a noisy distraction, allowing you to flank the enemy while your team soaks up bullets (which mercifully quiets the irritating and almost constant stream of "Yes, sir?" "Captain?" "Sir?" that you'll endure if you try to stash them in an out-of-the-way spot).

TACTICAL INDIFFERENCE

The only other feasible approach is to use the new real-time tactical map to plot out their movements, step by step. But this is only marginally better; in order to get your team where you want them in a reasonable time, it becomes necessary to set waypoints around literally every obstacle—and pray that they don't run into *each other* on the way to their destinations.

It's a shame. This new overhead map should have made the game vastly deeper and more strategic; the *Ghost Recon* series, like its brother *Rainbow Six*, is at its best when you're coordinating complex, multilayered attacks. Even the console versions provide A.I. adequate enough for timed pincer maneuvers...but here, your squad can be worse than useless.

All that said, *GRAW2*'s single-player campaign is tense enough and challenging enough to prove a worthwhile diversion—provided you set aside any expectation of intelligence on the part of your computer-controlled compatriots. Sounds pretty mediocre, eh? That's because I haven't talked about online play yet.

REDEMPTION

Often, tactical shooters prove disappointingly shallow in online play, but *GRAW2* has one stellar mode going for it. Yes, you've got old standbys like Deathmatch and "Hamburger Hill" (the capture-and-hold model), but the real standout is Recon vs. Assault, in which one team attempts to destroy a selection of AA tanks while the other team defends them. Sounds simple enough, but dig this: The new scout class can "tag" enemies, which causes them to show up on all your teammates' HUDs—and the defenders have unlimited lives, while the attackers can only respawn after an AA tank is destroyed. You'll also level up your character over the course of a game, unlocking new gear—and you can gain points toward your new level *even when you're dead*, by piggybacking on another player while in "ghost" mode and tagging any enemies that get too close.

It's the kind of mode that rewards careful play and subtlety, and it's easily the most outstanding feature of this reasonably competent but otherwise fairly unremarkable shooter. Is it worth the full price of entry? Not quite—but the rest of the game is diverting enough to make up the difference. • **Joe Rybicki**



• Pathfinding on the tactical map. Note the impending corner issues.



• Everything looks better when peeked at from around a corner.

VERDICT		7/10
<p>■ Recon vs. Assault; tension and challenge; tactical map.</p> <p>■ Offensively stupid squadmates; the rest of the online modes aren't on par with Recon vs. Assault.</p>		
		GOOD
		Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE



Someone's a fan of *Godzilla vs. Mothra*. Getting past this guy involves grappling your way to the top of a cliff while avoiding its wind-whipping wings.

LOST PLANET: EXTREME CONDITION

Liking it is extremely conditional

PUBLISHER: Capcom DEVELOPER: Capcom GENRE: Third-Person Shooter AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.steampowered.com) ESRB RATING: Teen MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: Pentium 4 CPU, 512MB RAM (1GB for Windows Vista), 8GB hard drive space, 256MB videocard (gamepad recommended) MULTIPLAYER: 2-16 players VERSION REVIEWED: Final E-tail

REVIEW

Better than stuffing your head in a freezer, Capcom's *Lost Planet: Extreme Condition* comes with all the frost(ing) and none of the freezer burn. If you want something that finally flaunts DirectX 10, here it is, pretty as a neon blizzard under glass, though the actual play's as dull as it ever was on the Xbox 360. Scratch that: Even more so, since the console version's cockeyed autoaim graduates to "you point, you hit" here, making combat less about tactics than picking bottles off a barrel. When I say "blew through the story in five hours on normal difficulty," I'm talking five without a reload.

I guess I should be grateful. It meant less time flicking rockets and Gatling rounds at giant bugs and snow pirates while slurping pools of orange goop to stay toasty. That's the game's shtick: It's so darned chilly, you have to ingest Thermal Energy (T-ENG) to keep from freezing. This manifests as a number relentlessly counting down to "you die," which you refill by rolling over piles of molten energy. How do you get T-ENG? By blowing up machinery, snuffing snow pirates, and shooting bugs in the butt (excuse me—*carapace posteriori*).

LOST IN THE SNOW

You play an amnesiac named Wayne, living on a planet that humans failed to terraform. Some bugs called Akrid kicked the humans off, and somewhere in the muddle, your dad was killed...making you Rambo in a parka, with guns and a few exoskeletal Vital Suits (think "joyless *BattleTech* caricature"), in search of the killer. Between levels, your pals prattle on about aliens, pirates, corporate conspiracies, and a great bossy beast whose moniker is a color plus a body part, i.e., Green Eye (which—let's be honest—is a happy step up from Pink Toe or Purple Earlobe).

AS DULL AS IT EVER WAS ON THE XBOX 360.

Controlling Wayne with first- or third-person views, your only special move involves firing a grappling hook to tag out-of-reach areas or stop yourself from slipping off ledges. Mostly you just shoot across glare-lit snowfields or raid luminous caverns teeming with flying millipedes, pausing only to activate energy posts and boost your T-ENG for the inevitable boss fight. It's too bad combat hinges on such a dumb mechanic: Any time Wayne takes heavy damage, he falls down, pauses before rising, then falls down *again* if an enemy has a pattern going. It's tortuously inane, but does it make the game more difficult? Let's just say that, even with your face in the dirt, losing takes effort...and that's never a positive.

Things don't improve online. Deathmatch is...well, it's Deathmatch, and the other modes like "Post Grab" (tap a key really fast to trigger posts that replenish your T-ENG) and "Fugitive" (hunt the game session host on a timer) play like shadows of smarter online modes with only guns, rocket launchers, and grenades on your menu.

Talk about the old sound and fury saw—you'll finish *Lost Planet: Extreme Condition* too soon and won't go back for seconds. That's really the definition of why not to buy something, isn't it? **• Matt Peckham**



Assume the position, because it's the one you're in half the time.



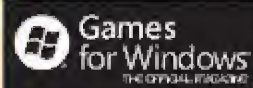
Pick up Gatling guns or rocket launchers and stick up to two at a time on Vital Suits. In a pinch, you can slip them back off to be hauled around on foot.

VERDICT

- ✦ It's really, really pretty.
- ✦ Very easy; your nickname is "super-klutz"; unimaginative multiplayer.

5/10

AVERAGE





• The new Attack Sub gets a bonus against other submarines, and presumably can also handle itself well against Dutch merchantmen.

CIVILIZATION IV: BEYOND THE SWORD

Rule without end

PUBLISHER: 2K Games DEVELOPER: Firaxis GENRE: Turn-Based Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Everyone 10+
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.2GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 1.7GB hard drive space, Civilization IV MULTIPLAYER: 2-16 players VERSION REVIEWED: Near-final Reviewable

REVIEW



It took two years, two expansions, and enough patches to stitch up Humpty Dumpty, but *Civilization IV* is finally worthy of being called the best strategy game on the market. The latest expansion, *Beyond the Sword*, improves *Civ IV* so much that

you'll wonder how the infamous timesink ever sank a moment without it.

DECONSTRUCTING CIV

Beyond the Sword goes way, er, beyond mere tweaks, implementing fundamental gameplay changes and additions. First among these are the new *Galactic Civilizations*-style "events"—random occurrences that can spell calamity or opportunity for the recipient. Cleverly, these are tied to your civilization's choices throughout the game. For example, only players using the Slavery civic are vulnerable to Kirk-Douglas-and-friends slave revolts, while only players with clam hatcheries can discover rare black pearls. Occasionally, players even receive worldwide "quests" that they can accomplish for a massive bonus—while their rivals try to do the same.

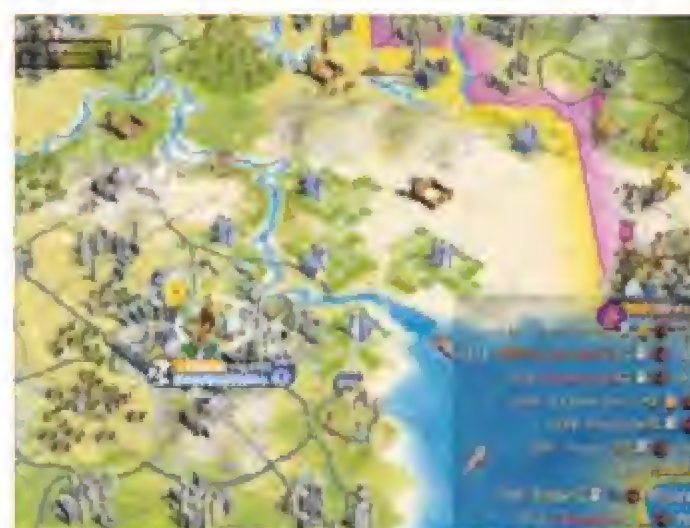
Apart from the new event system, though, *BTS* showcases more quality features than a Woody Allen-only multiplex. The new Apostolic Palace wonder increases the role of religion in the early game, while multinational corporations largely replace religion later on. These corporations provide massive, game-changing bonuses to their home countries. Cereal Mills, for example, boost population growth, while Standard Ethanol supplies fossil fuels even if you have no oil...and gives a research bonus. Corporations finally give players a reason not to switch to the State Property civic (which renders them useless) late in the game.

And even when the changes are minor, they're welcome. Improved connectivity and simultaneous turns greatly speed up multiplayer. And on that subject, you and your buddies should load up one of *BTS*'s many innovative mods, which include a realistic depiction of World War II, a squad-based humans-versus-zombies conversion, and even a *Civ IV* take on *Defender*, in which you build cities, stock them with units, and try to hold out against waves of baddies.

CELEBRITY

Of course, no *Civ* expansion would be complete without a bevy of new races and leaders. You can now lead—among others—the Babylonians as Hammurabi and the Portuguese as John II. De Gaulle, Churchill, and Stalin take time off from their regular gig at the History Channel to make an appearance, although—as far as the *Civ* development staff is concerned—Hitler remains in 10-foot-pole land. Moreover, the entire leader dynamic is changed: Players can now pair any leader (and his unique talents) with any civilization (and its unique units and buildings). So, if you've always dreamed of Napoleon leading an army of redcoats, now's your chance to show Bizarro French Wellington who's boss.

Apart from a few quibbles (large maps still load at a glacial pace and the A.I. still builds cities right on top of yours), *BTS* takes a strong game with some serious flaws and turns it into a fantastic game with a couple of minor flaws. No small feat, that. • Eric Neigher



• Despite *Civilization IV*'s many patches, the A.I. still has the annoying propensity to build cities virtually inside your borders.

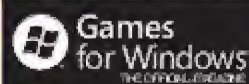
VERDICT

Improves just about every aspect of the game; streamlined multiplayer.

Still hasn't fixed some annoying A.I. behaviors; long load times on large maps.

9/10

EXCELLENT



GEOMETRY WARS: RETRO EVOLVED

Chaos field

PUBLISHER: Valve Software DEVELOPER: Bizarre Creations GENRE: Shoot-em-up AVAILABILITY: E-tail (www.steampowered.com) ESRB RATING: Not Rated
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 150MB hard drive space, 128MB videocard (gamepad recommended) MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Final Downloadable

REVIEW



I'm far from the first to sing the praises of 2005's Xbox Live Arcade hit *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved* (now available on the PC for a mere \$4 via Steam), but it's a game worth talking about. Basically a reimagining of the classic coin-op shoot-em-up *Robotron: 2084*—with shades of “bullet hell” shooters like *Ikaruga* and

DoDonPachi—*Geometry Wars* is conceptually simple: Maneuver a ship across a flat playfield, shooting and dodging colorful enemies (in ever-increasing numbers), using either a mouse/keyboard combination or a gamepad (the game's default assumption is the Xbox 360 pad; the left and right analog sticks control movement and fire, while the triggers unleash

screen-clearing bombs), with the straightforward goal of *survival* (and high scores...though we don't get any online leaderboards à la the Xbox 360 version). Three lives, no continues—it's a manic, unfor-giving test of your hand-eye coordination.

Thing is, *Geometry Wars* captures that elusive essence known as *fun*...and reminds us that exhaus-tive prerendered cut-scenes, complex mechanics, and multimillion-dollar engines aren't the only roads to that goal. It's the *Tetris* factor: The minimalist design and the addictive, score-chasing nature keep you mesmerized for hours at a time. It's when you reach hour No. 3 of a marathon session—having entered a Zen state as you attempt to send your high score into seven-digit territory—that you realize the simple truth at work here: In a world of interactive stories and photo-realism, *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved* is just a *really fun game*. That's all we're looking for, isn't it? •Ryan Scott



•Uh-oh—it's the red circles and blue diamonds, the big bruisers of the polygon patrol!

VERDICT

Simple, addictive, and fun (and cheap).

Lacks the online leaderboards of its Xbox 360 counterpart.

9/10

EXCELLENT

Games for Windows
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CARRIERS AT WAR

Mood music for war gamers

PUBLISHER: Matrix Games DEVELOPER: Strategic Studies Group GENRE: Real-Time Historical War Game AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.matrixgames.com) ESRB RATING: Not Rated
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 800MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 250MB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER: 2 players VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

REVIEW

War gamers grin when reminded of *Carriers at War*, the 1991 milestone from Strategic Studies Group. In an era when everyone bemoans the woeful A.I. that plagues most war games, 2007's *CAW* reprise gives us hope that virtual admirals can, in fact, give us a regular kick in the pants. And, but for a few blemishes, it brings that grin back.

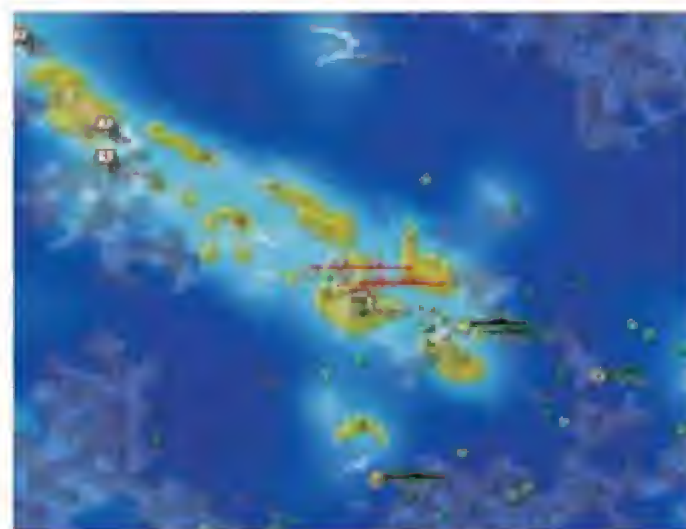
CAW lies on the opposite end of the spectrum from *War in the Pacific* and *Uncommon Valor*, which also cover the war against Japan. While those two games ask the player to micromanage every plane and ship (and land force), *CAW* is a game of carrier strategy. In short: Can you spot the enemy before he spots you? And can you press the advantage?

This means that you don't equip individual aircraft or manage each search plane; rather, you give orders for a general search area, and when a strike opportunity presents itself, you decide how many aircraft to send and how many to keep in reserve. Animations resolve your strikes while you watch, which adds a surprising amount of tension.

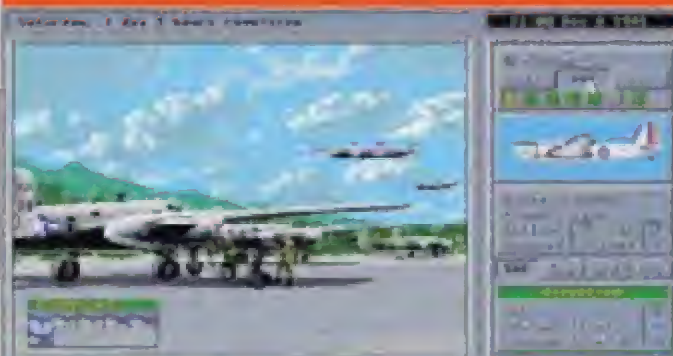
CAW takes place in five-minute increments. You can set the game speed as fast or as slow as you like, and any new contacts pause the action. The result is an almost-mesmerizing naval ballet in which you watch your search planes fly out, wait tensely for a contact you can trust, send out a strike, and find you've hit a bunch of cruisers. Meanwhile, the A.I. has 150 dive bombers coming for you. Outdueling *CAW*'s A.I. is satisfying like few other things in war-gaming.

That satisfaction wanes after the first couple games you play. The problem with the new version of the game is that the fixed scenarios play out the same way each time. Because the starting locations are preset, you'll soon learn to make reactive moves before the enemy acts. This is made worse by fog of war sighting reports that aren't variable enough to disguise ships' identities. If you know how many ships are in a group, you can identify that group every time. It wasn't this way in the old game...but it is now.

Fixing these kinds of minor bugs is Strategic Studies Group's specialty; the company exhibits excellent postrelease support. In any case, *CAW* is good enough to justify a purchase of the prepatch version—just don't expect to load each plane and bomb stuff yourself. Let the computer do it, sit back, and wait for the torpedoes. **Bruce Geryk**



BACK IN TIME



In 1991, war games were good at hiding simplicity through the inclusion of visible-but-irrelevant detail—that's why the new *Carriers at War* seems simpler than the original game. It isn't...but to a war gamer in 1991, having a computer handle all those aircraft and ships seemed complex in itself. Given how far games have come since then, the inability to touch the details directly may frustrate modern gamers. It's a great example of how gaming expectations change our experiences. You really *can't* go home again.

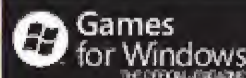
VERDICT

An easy-to-grasp game for the novice.

Not detailed enough for the hardcore.

7/10

GOOD



The cat-and-mouse game between carrier forces is—appropriately—the best part of the game.

COMBAT MISSION: SHOCK FORCE

Shockingly mediocre

PUBLISHER: Paradox Entertainment DEVELOPER: Battlefront.com GENRE: Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.battlefront.com) ESRB RATING: Not Rated
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 1GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2 players VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

REVIEW

Y The *Combat Mission: Shock Force* manual contains a fascinating little discussion of the rationale behind setting the game in Syria: It's a nice story of the sort you see too rarely, where the designers let you in on their thinking...and what you're playing suddenly makes more sense. That would've been a great model to extend to the rest of the game.

The designers boast that, feature for feature, *Combat Mission: Shock Force* "has more differences [sic] with the earlier *Combat Mission* than you might expect." Mistaking additional features for gameplay improvements plagues many sequel designers, but with a series as solid as *Combat Mission*, it's not hard to imagine the motivation for putting in "more stuff." The game's speculative U.S./Syria conflict may just be a proxy for the Iraq War, but it opens a lot of interesting possibilities. The new *CM:SF* engine does a nice job of depicting infantry, which was the old game's weak suit. The question is: What happened to the stuff that already worked well?

THE NEW GAME FEELS LIKE A GIANT STEP BACK TO THE FIRST *COMBAT MISSION*.

The new game feels like a giant step back to the first *Combat Mission*, where the clunky controls, sluggish engine, weak A.I., and questionable unit pathfinding were all excusable because we hadn't really seen anything like it before. All four of those elements seem (if anything) even worse here. We finally get a campaign, but—perhaps partly because of the setting—the terrain looks flat and uninteresting. The vehicles and soldiers look great, but you'll rarely be zoomed in enough to notice. This goes into the Great Gaming Mysteries file: Who screwed this up, and will it get fixed? • Bruce Geryk



• The vehicle models and textures are nice, but you'll only zoom in to check line of sight.

VERDICT

- Extremely detailed; looks nice up close.
- ❑ Pretty clunky and clumsy, with some questionable abstraction.

5/10

AVERAGE



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CYBORG RUMBLE

GAMEPAD FOR PC



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• Solo rallying is fun, but *DiRT*'s new multicar rallying is a blast—if your videocard's up to the job.



DiRT

The console-ification of Colin McRae

PUBLISHER: Codemasters DEVELOPER: Codemasters GENRE: Racing AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Everyone MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 3GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 12.5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard (gamepad recommended) MULTIPLAYER: 2-100 players...sort of VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

REVIEW

✓ **The latest edition** of Codemasters' venerated *Colin McRae Rally*, uncleanly entitled *DiRT*, breaks out of the series' conventional single-player, time-trial boundaries for the very first time, delivering a sweeping account of both solo *and* multicar rallying disciplines...and more track types and real-world automobiles than a terrified co-driver sheds droplets of perspiration. *DiRT*'s also the prettiest, glossiest racer to date, and its complex physics engine is so perfectly optimized for analog gamepads (it seems specifically tuned to the Xbox 360 pad) that a steering wheel is almost rendered—dare we say—passé.

So, considering the PC version of *DiRT* is virtually identical to its console counterpart, it's gotta be *at least* as good, right? Er...not so fast there, Speed Racer.

ANY PORT IN A STORM?

DiRT is a prime example why die-hard PC drivers loathe the influence of the console generation. The game's an almost-unadulterated port: You can't use a mouse in menus; you can't modify a setting without incurring innumerable, irritatingly lengthy delays; and if you haven't recently dropped three or four bills on a videocard, you'd best prepare...for...a...slideshow.

Though nothing short of groundbreaking when viewed on an Xbox 360 or via a megabuck card such as Nvidia's GeForce 8800—where its brain-bruising damage model, cinematic-grade lighting, and attention to meticulous detail make the game look like a finely crafted movie—*DiRT* nevertheless indiscriminately annihilates mid-range videocards. Don't believe the back of the game box: If you're not on the cutting edge, prepare to chop the detail levels as low as they go (thus sacrificing the visual subtlety that makes the game look so realistic) to achieve even a semismooth presentation...and a theoretically drivable framerate.

GET THEE TO THE COMPUTER STORE

Ah, but even then, the *DiRT* mobiles won't respond like you want them to. They'll seesaw back and forth, threatening to careen you into the nearest tree or guardrail. Seems the only way to ensure you're not constantly fighting the controls is to dump the old card *and* use an analog gamepad, rather than a steering wheel or joystick. If you manage to meet all those demands, you'll see the game in all its glory and experience the physics for what they are—challenging and complex, but also much more "floaty" than most dedicated sim-heads would prefer.

DiRT's career mode brazenly flaunts the game's exhilarating new head-to-head race options, its incredible versatility (dirt, gravel, and tarmac surfaces; cars, buggies, and trucks with front- and rear-wheel drive; point-to-point, closed course, and hill-climb events), and every creak and groan in its overflowing arsenal of audio goodies. Substantially less satisfying is the online component, where head-to-head play is strictly—and strangely—verboten. Though you can monitor your competitors' progress on a real-time leaderboard, you can't actually see or interact with other vehicles directly. To rub battery acid in the wound, Codemasters offers only two racing modes (Hill Climb and Rally) and restricts player communication to a series of goofy presets.

If you crack the vault for a killer rig, and if you're willing to confront the controller issues, *DiRT* mimics the excellence of its console sibling...and if you don't, it won't. •Gord Goble



• When a cutting-edge videocard runs the game, details such as windshield cracks become that much more finely detailed and authentic.

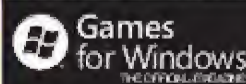
VERDICT

✓ Looks beautiful on high-end videocards; most versatile *McRae* yet.

✗ Absurd hardware demands; tepid online mode; little love for driving wheels.

7/10

GOOD





REVIEWS WRAP-UP

The games that were too late (or too lame) to review in this issue



THE GUILD 2: PIRATES OF THE EUROPEAN SEAS

PUBLISHER: **DreamCatcher** DEVELOPER: **4Head Studios** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **Retail**
 ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 3GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

Pirates as icons are only slightly more popular than all the dismal attempts at modeling them in games. Someday we'll get a decent pirate sim...but until then, you can pass on 4Head's mediocre expansion to its dynastic medieval RTS *The Guild 2*. Problem is, the three new classes (Doctor, Fisherman, and Pirate) are just the original's Scholar, Patron, and Rogue with name swaps and a few unexciting abilities. Turn on business automation, and you'd hardly know the difference between the Fisher running for cardinal or the Medicus rallying for king. With all the rehashing, *Guild 2* fans will come away frowning.



UFO: AFTERLIGHT

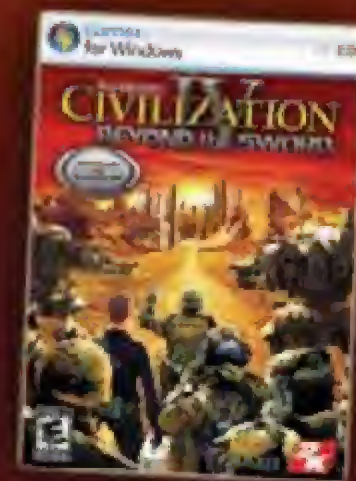
PUBLISHER: **Cenega** DEVELOPER: **Altar Games** GENRE: **Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (www.steampowered.com)**
 ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1 GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 4GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

Third time's not the charm for the *UFO* series of small-squad tactical games. The latest installment, *UFO: Afterlight*, slavishly apes its genre forebears. You start out with a few green troops, a small base, and some mysterious occurrences. A dozen real-time alien-swatting missions later, you've got Mossad-worthy troops, a veritable Death Star HQ, and a chance to save mankind. Course, nothing's wrong with hewing to the old *X-Com* formula, but *Afterlight* shoots itself in the foot with repetitive missions, dopey A.I., boring maps, and awful voice acting. It's time to admit this afterseries has jumped the aftershark.

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THE HOT LIST

Five still-available games to buy right now

STEAM-POWERED

Who needs brick-and-mortar gaming stores? Valve Software's Steam download service (www.steampowered.com) is growing by the minute, with plenty of good—and affordable—games available on demand. Here are five of the best.



SAM & MAX: SEASON ONE

Steve Purcell's madcap dog-and-bunny detective duo's remained sadly absent from the adventure-gaming world since 1993's *Sam & Max Hit the Road*. Fortunately, Telltale Games' did 'em justice in this six-episode series of accessible (and hilarious) adventures that take Sam and Max everywhere from the White House to the moon. Adventure gamers haven't had it this good since *Grim Fandango*—if this series is a sign of things to come, Telltale may have a place next to Sierra and LucasArts in the adventure-game developers' pantheon.



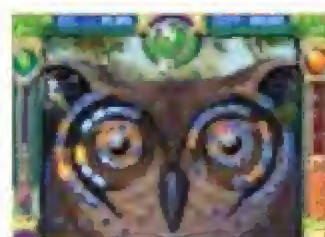
JADE EMPIRE

BioWare's martial-arts RPG takes the *Knights of the Old Republic* formula to an exotic techno-fantasy world, where your custom-made Zen master and friends uncover sinister plots involving legions of demons and undead. Your choices influence the course of the story, as well as the myriad martial-arts stances you can choose from during the game's real-time combat. *Jade Empire* isn't quite the tour de force that *KOTOR* was, but it's still one of the most satisfying RPGs since Black Isle Studios' heyday.



HALF-LIFE 2

The game that introduced most of us to Steam—and not in a particularly great way, as glitches with the activation system left many gamers unable to play. That's ancient history, though, and what matters now is that this is one of PC gaming's greatest shooters, a landmark in the development of the genre, with physics-based puzzles and gameplay still widely imitated three years later. If you haven't played this yet, you don't qualify as a serious PC gamer. We're not even kidding.



PEGGLE DELUXE

It's like pachinko meets the Teletubbies, which is the least-promising-sounding description of one of the most addictive puzzle games of the past year. The object: Clear all the pegs on the screen by shooting a ball, with power-up assists from a series of animal characters. What at first seems to be a matter of total luck soon reveals itself to have a skill factor after all: It's all about aiming and angling your shots, and picking the right power-up for each successive screen. Do not scoff at *Peggle*.



DARWINIA

A small army of little people runs around inside of your PC. No—really. The best way to describe *Darwinia*: It's an ingenious blend of *Lemmings* and *Cannon Fodder*, cast inside the guts of an old Apple II computer. Order up units and herd your dopey Darwinians away from an impending virus attack. Introversion's low-tech approach to action-strategy won us over... and we can still play it now, thanks to Steam.

REVIEW INDEX

Game names in yellow indicate GFW Editors' Choice award winners

GAME TITLE	SCORE	ISSUE
Ancient Wars: Sparta	5	8
ArmA: Combat Operations	6	8
Battlestations: Midway	5	5
Blitzkrieg II: Fall of the Reich	5	6
Call of Juarez	8	9
City Life: World Edition	8.5	6
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	9	6
Dungeon Runners	8	9
The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles	8	7
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Sam & Max: Episode 3—The Mole, the Mob, and the Meatball	7	5
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Sam & Max: Episode 5—Realty 2.0	7	7
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Silverfall	3	7
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Theatre of War	4	8
Titan Quest: Immortal Throne	9	5
Tomb Raider: Anniversary	8.5	9
Top Spin 2	6	7
TrackMania United	7	9
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	3	6
War Front: Turning Point	5	5
Whirlwind Over Vietnam	4	8
World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	10	5



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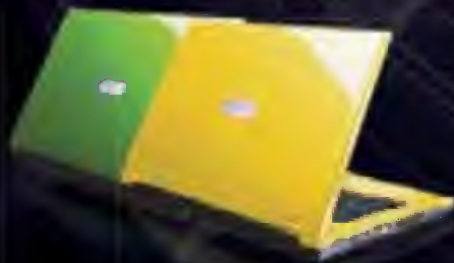


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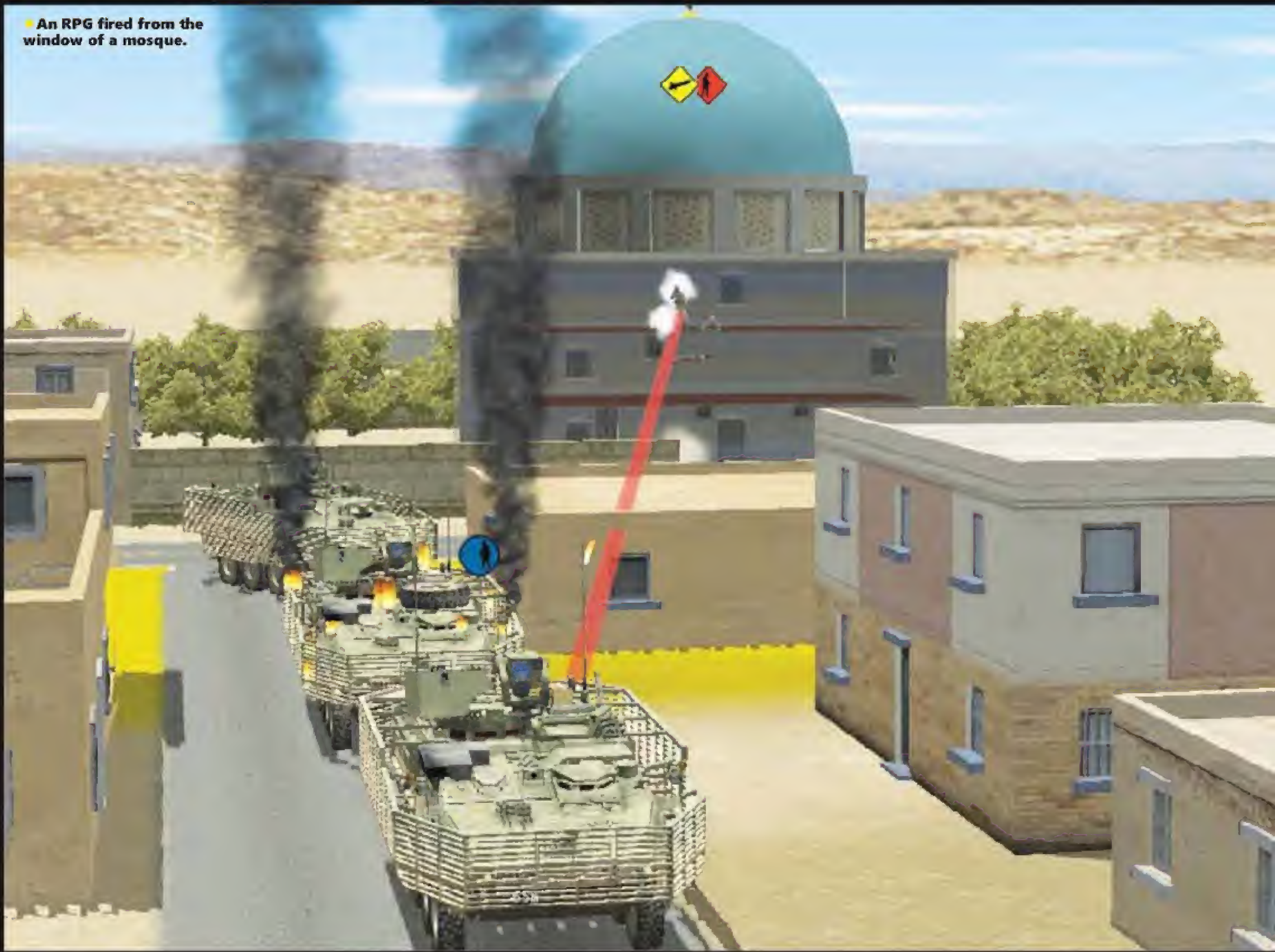




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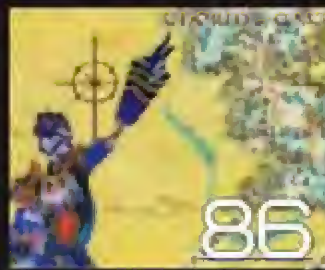
• An RPG fired from the window of a mosque.



• The streets of al-Fubar.



• A technical knockout.



MAPS

Crisis on Infinite Servers

Which way is Isengard, again? These maps never do help....

86

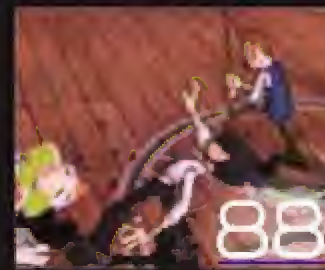


THE SIMS

Falling Pieces

Just imagine: a *Sims* line for casual gamers. Yeah, that's a crazy idea, isn't it?

87



PA

Sound Off

The guys behind *Penny Arcade* make their own game. Is that a good thing?

88



TOM vs. BRUCE

Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

COMBAT MISSION: SHOCK FORCE

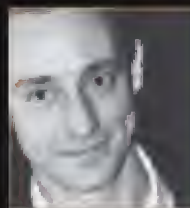
Debacle at al-Fubar

PUBLISHER: Paradox Interactive DEVELOPER: Battlefront.com GENRE: Strategy ESRB RATING: Not Rated



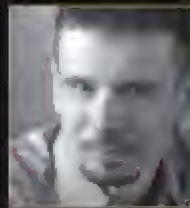
• It's a patio party, as everyone watches Bruce's Stryker careening drunkenly through the streets of al-Fubar.

COLUMN



Tom Chick

Prominent freelance videogame critic Tom Chick also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.



Bruce Geryk

Bruce says goodbye for a few issues—but stay tuned to these pages for more wacky head-to-head hijinks.

TOM: The game is *Combat Mission: Shock Force*, the modern-warfare version of developer Battlefront's turn-based WWII tactical game about Nazi tanks in Europe and North Africa. The setting is Syria, newly invaded by the U.S. The manual's got some backstory about Syrian dirty bombs detonated in America. This isn't some kerfuffle about WMDs, human rights violations, violation of arms embargoes, or Project for the New American Century ambitions. It's a noble cause, by golly!

BRUCE: If you read the manual notes, you'll find that the game almost wasn't set in Syria at all. Apparently, the Battlefront guys were trying to "get ahead of the deployment envelope," or whatever you say in military talk when you try to predict the future and guess where the next American war will be. Remember, this was about four years ago. They admit to some soul-searching about changing the setting, but that would have delayed the game into whenever the next "American Century" is going to be, so they stuck with the whole Syria thing. We even get a disclaimer stating that this game doesn't advocate war with Syria, which is a conclusion I only think you could draw if you live in a leftist panic hive.

TOM: Many of the scenarios are set up like conventional WWII battles, with roughly equivalent forces squaring off against each other. Of course, this requires some wishful thinking about Syria's elite Republican Guard and their outdated Russian equipment's ability to stand up to U.S. forces. Since Syrian forces don't have fancy radios, it means occasional delays between giving a Syrian unit

orders and having it actually do anything. Oh, and Syria never gets airstrikes. That's realism for ya. But never mind this unlikely presentation of Cold War warfare, which peaked in 1985 with Gary Grigsby's *Mech Brigade*—just ask Bruce. The real curiosity in *Combat Mission: Shock Force* is its presentation of asymmetric warfare, with combatants disguised as civilians using IEDs and car bombs. Just remember, this is not Iraq. It's Syria. It's Syria-not-Iraq.

BRUCE: See how Tom works in a reference to *Mech Brigade* at the same time as a slam against my ability to appreciate games? That's how I—and the NSA—know he's a Syrian sympathizer.

TOM: The scenario we're playing is Ambush at al-Fubar. A column of four U.S. Stryker armored personnel carriers is ambushed (Ha-ha, al-Fubar! Get it? Nothing says "funny" like jokes about military lingo and the Middle East!) along a north/south street just north of a mosque. Three of the Strykers are destroyed, with a fourth immobilized. The U.S. has a platoon stranded in the street, but reinforcements are on the way. Scattered throughout the city are Syrian "unconventionals," which is Battlefront's term for terrorists. Bruce is playing the U.S. and I'm playing the Syrians. His objective is to drive me from the ambush area and a hotel to the north. My objective is to destroy the immobilized Stryker and inflict casualties. Incidentally, here's a fun bit of trivia: "Stryker" is not a typo. The vehicles are apparently named after the guy who had the adamantium put into Wolverine's skeleton.

BRUCE: My initial strategy is pretty simple: Hunker down and wait for reinforcements. In fact, that's what my orders say. I'm not about to try some kind of Bruce Willis-style breakout. If anything goes wrong, I plan to defend myself by saying I was just following orders.

TOM: At the start, I hide the combatants near the ambush point and start rushing everyone in the city toward the wreck. It's like the scene in *Black Hawk Down* when all the Somalis are rushing toward the helicopter crash...but in Syria, and with a Stryker instead of a helicopter. I'd love to get everyone into position before opening fire, but because we're only allowed to issue orders between 60-second real-time execution phases, ordering a unit to hide at the end of its movement orders is impossible. Instead, I have to manually toggle the hide command whenever I give >

Extend \ Tom vs. Bruce

orders. This means hiding and unhiding can only be done at the top of every minute. How clunky.

BRUCE: I have a strong position at the south end of the street, where the Strykers (before the scenario started) were apparently caught while turning. In this defensive elbow, I have 2nd Squad in a building northwest of the corner, and 3rd Squad just to the southeast. I've deployed their crew-served weapons and don't plan on moving them until they can climb into a waiting friendly Stryker. The third squad (which is actually the 1st Squad) is in a building to the west of the column, which is in the expected path of the assault.

TOM: I start out with a big push. I have everyone concentrate fire on the building near the mosque where I know Bruce has at least one squad holed up. I'm moving an RPG team into the mosque and one into a building right next to the Stryker. I order my technical—which is just a crappy pickup truck with a gun mounted in the bed—around the corner. If I've timed this right, I should have shots coming at the Stryker from three sides while also laying down suppressing fire.

BRUCE: There goes the Stryker I was trying to protect. Tom faked me out beautifully by running some infantry across the street to my right. I set my target arc to cover any more guys coming from that direction, whereupon Tom ran a technical right up the street directly in front of me and knocked out the Stryker with an AT gun. Talk about a head fake.

TOM: I don't think the technical gets credit for the kill. Someone named Billah strolled up to the window of the mosque and fired a single 93mm HEAT missile from his RPG-7V1. It impacted against the rear of the Stryker and destroyed it. Now I'm moving the rest of my teams toward the ambush area. I'm not sure what kind of reinforcements Bruce is going to get, but now I need to get control of the area and hunker down.

BRUCE: The game tells me I have reinforcements, which is kind of a lie—because the truth is that I just have a mortar strike available. Tom seems to be trying to infiltrate the buildings immediately to the east of the ambushed convoy. I'm going to place an antipersonnel strike in a 38-meter circle based on the roof of a low building he's likely using to mass his troops. I don't quite have line-of-sight from my spotter to where I want the strike to land, so I find a spot he can see a bit to the south and expand the target circle until it covers the rooftop in question. I call for an immediate strike—accuracy isn't as important as speed here, because this place is going to be crawling with unconventional. Plus, 1st Squad is in trouble. Hang on, boys.

TOM: For some reason, I can see the radius and spotting location for the mortar strike Bruce is calling in. Either it's a bug in the game or I have some sort of supersecret superior Syrian intel-gathering ability. Either way, he's aiming at someplace where I only have one guy, but I'll move him indoors just to be on the safe side. The ensuing fireworks are harmless and pretty.

BRUCE: OK, my reinforcements are finally here. I have an entire platoon with support lined up on the road directly east of the ambush, right at the map's edge. I'm going to make a coordinated dash down that road to the block directly east of the security perimeter, secure it, and then leapfrog to the stranded platoon. Once I've made contact, I can head toward the hotel.

TOM: My rush to reach the ambush area isn't working so well. Suddenly, the streets are littered with the bodies of dead Syrians. Maybe I should have used the crawl command. I think I'll have to make do with just holding the hotel at this point. OK, Syrians, everyone fall back to the hotel.

BRUCE: I've played *Combat Mission* games for, oh, seven years. I've played lots of scenarios where you have to coordinate armored columns. Sometimes you have to give the rear-most units the pause order so they wait until the units in front have started moving. But in all those hundreds of games, I've never seen a mess like this. I can't even describe it. You just have to see the screenshots.

TOM: Suddenly, a Stryker dashes out of the east and destroys my technical. The U.S. squad disembarks right in front of a building where I have a bunch of guys with an RPG team keeping an eye out for just such an occasion. Of course, they're set to "hide." Since unhiding only occurs at the top of every minute, I've missed the chance to shoot at Bruce. Once the top of the minute rolls around, everyone's left my line of sight. Great.

BRUCE: I'm not joking—my Strykers are driving through people's backyards, winding around like drunkards, while a single Stryker made a mad dash down the road and is disembarking on what is soon to be an isolated squad of very unfortunate troopers. Meanwhile, my attempt to disentangle the 2nd Platoon conga line leads to further hilarity. If I lose this scenario because of the A.I. pathfinding...OK, it won't carry any meaningful consequences. But I'll be mad.

TOM: Now unhidden, my RPG team takes a shot at the eager Stryker. The shot misses and kicks up some dirt across the street. Everyone else stands around and watches while Bruce's infantry strolls into the cover of a building. Good going, guys—way to stick it to the infidels. My RPG team finally takes out the Stryker, which has been chewing up the other Syrians in the area who can't bother to open fire. Then a bunch more of Bruce's vehicles roll up, but my intrepid RPG team decides to conserve its remaining four rounds for a rainy day or something. Meanwhile, my machine gun on the hotel roof opens fire on some armored Strykers that are way the hell across town. Good work, dude. Way to lay down suppressing fire on an armored infantry carrier and expose your position. Sometimes Syrians hide, and sometimes they don't. Far to the east, I see a Stryker and Humvee executing what look like 10- or 12-point turnarounds among some buildings. Al-Fubar, indeed.

BRUCE: Here's the deal: I'm kind of having a hard time with this. Not the strategy, because I've played so much of the *Combat Mission* series that I can practically sleepwalk through the order process. But I'm not so keen on watching U.S. troops get shot at in the streets of a Mideast town. I don't zoom in to watch the infantry animations, even though they're clearly impressive (watch a squad disembark from a Stryker, even when zoomed out—it looks pretty cool), because it's jarring and unpleasant to watch American soldiers get hit... even when they're obviously just computer models. So, is it in poor taste to create a game like this?

TOM: If it's in poor taste, it's unfair to single out *Combat Mission: Shock Force*, which is at least making a serious attempt to model the dynamics of what's going on in the real world. Granted, it's failing miserably, since it's in such a sorry state. But shooters like *Battlefield 2* and *Ghost Recon*:

Advanced Warfighter flirted much more disingenuously with the concept of dying American soldiers. Frankly, I think this game deserves credit for having the honesty to call a spade a spade. Well, a spade a shovel, perhaps, considering its coy insistence that this is Syria-not-Iraq.

BRUCE: Yeah, Tom is right. Plenty of games let you control the SS Das Reich Panzer Division, or elements of some equally repugnant military formation—maybe at Normandy or the Ardennes—and shoot at computer representations of American soldiers. I'm not up on all the shooter games like Tom is, but doesn't *America's Army* do something with Mideast maps?

TOM: Not only that, but *America's Army* is a recruiting tool. The implication of portraying killed American soldiers is even more disturbing in that context. Anyway, back to our little Syria-not-Iraq sandbox of wacky A.I. and bad interface: Firing from the top of the hotel, I manage to take out a U.S. machine-gun team that was walking around in the street. I've got one guy with an RPG left, and he's hanging back by the hotel. I'll be in a pickle if Bruce drives his men up to the hotel. Instead, he's...well, frankly, I can't tell what he's doing.

BRUCE: Well, 3rd Squad, 2nd Platoon got into the building just north of where the mortar massacre occurred. I think the security zone is, uh, secured.

TOM: One of Bruce's Strykers charges the hotel. My remaining RPG guy takes a shot. Then the Stryker merrily drives back the way he came, as if he were cruising chicks in the streets of al-Fubar. My RPG guy takes two more shots at the ass-end of the Stryker. The hotel now has no antivehicle munitions. I see another Stryker coming along the road toward the mosque, where my original RPG guy doesn't seem inclined to fire his last round. I eventually realize this is because that side of the mosque's third floor is windowless. If I'd moved him to the second floor, maybe he would have fired. It's pretty silly that I'm supposed to keep track of windows and doors in a game with such sluggish, unwieldy camera controls.

BRUCE: I'm not going after the hotel. You can court-martial me if you want, but I have a couple reasons for this. The first is the awful tactical A.I., which I suspect will turn a coordinated assault on that building into a game of military Marco Polo. Secondly, I have no idea how many more RPGs or antitank guns Tom has. And that means things could get ugly, and the odd fact is that I really, really don't feel comfortable giving a bunch of U.S. soldiers—virtual though they may be—orders to rush some building where their IFVs could get brewed up, and then for the rest of the game I'm going to have to look at knocked-out American vehicles and the resulting KIAs. If the guys at *Battlefront* were trying to make a role-playing game a hundred times more emotionally involving than the best elf-pretending simulator from BioWare, they succeeded. But they totally failed in making a game with decent A.I., camera controls, and pathfinding, so it's not like they should be doing a lot of bragging.

TOM: When Bruce requests a cease-fire, I'm more than happy to oblige him, if for no other reason than that I'm tired of struggling with this lousy game. At least *Peggle* didn't have such bad A.I. ●

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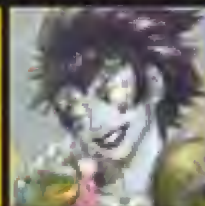
CRISIS ON INFINITE SE

Trekking across the vast MMORPG landscape



THIS MONTH: IN-GAME MAPS MAKE YOU STUPID

COLUMN



Cindy Yans

Got something to say about this column? You can meet Cindy over at [434, 3000, -4] to discuss it.

+ Lost? Can't figure out how to find the closest branch of the eNanobanc? Do you possess 25 undelivered goretusk livers that have been burning a hole in your codpiece for the past three levels? A number of years ago,

these would've constituted real dilemmas—but not anymore. Nowadays, thanks to the inclusion of in-game mapping systems, it's easier than ever to find your way around an MMO game world.

CAN'T GET THEAH FROM HEAH

At first, the original *EverQuest* had no in-game maps, no billboards, no personal transportation, and no teleport pads. It was a vast world where you *walked* everywhere, dammit. *EQ* featured two main navigational methods (besides creating your own map): First, you could follow directions (a ludicrous concept, I realize), which

went a tad beyond that "Just follow the yellow brick road" crap. Instead, it's "Go out the iron gate—not the one next to the fishmonger—then proceed under the clothesline, past the pile of yak dung, and take a right at the third sewer grate. If you get to the fountain with the naked, peeing bronze dwarf, you've gone too far. Keep the graffiti-covered pumpkins to your right. Talk to the earless gondolier (sometimes he's there, and sometimes he's not), and you should be OK after that." Except—just like in real life—guys don't ask for directions.

Instead, they might use the sophisticated grid-in-your-mind method (focus within, young Padawan!). Example: Lobachevsky, Ybbob, Scutterbug, and Piffleface are in a pick-up group. Piffle dies, and he can't find his way back to the others:

YBBOB: comeon hurry!!!! we at [25,543, -2, 99,945].

PIFFLEFACE: u WHERE?

LOBACHEVSKY: It's three-space, dude.

PIFFLEFACE: huh?

LOBACHEVSKY: Three-space, you know, where three coordinates are required to define every point?

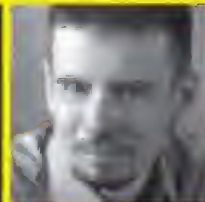
PIFFLEFACE: wut?



LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

COLUMN



Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—is *GFW*'s resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.

+ I got back from the Origins gaming convention in Columbus this year with some new hope for tactical computer war gaming. Mark H. Walker, designer of the award-winning *Lock 'n Load* board game series, is developing a PC version (subtitled *Heroes of Stalingrad*) alongside programmer Tom Proudfoot. The game itself is a very accessible tactical World War II affair, with infantry squads as its focus, and includes leaders, armor, and support weapons.

Walker's vision for this version is very faithful to the board game, down to all the modifiers and die rolls. It'll turn off some war gamers, but I love it because everything's out in the open, forcing you to make clear decisions. Of course, you have to deal with hidden units—and even some scripted events—but at each crucial juncture, you



• The game retains a board game feel, down to the graphics style and transparent mechanics.



• Artist Marc Schwanebeck's map designs are outstanding.

aren't left in the dark.

The game ships with a Stalingrad campaign for the German and Soviet sides. Units are selectable from a force pool, but you can carry surviving units from battle to battle—and they gain experience throughout, very similar to the *Panzer General* system. Some scenarios vary based on the outcome of previous ones, too. You'll be able to buy *Heroes of Stalingrad* in about six months. You can get more

information at www.locknloadgame.com.

In other news, I must bid you all farewell—at least for a while. I'm doing three months of neurosurgery at various locations across the country, and I've temporarily handed this column off to former *Computer Gaming World* editor and wargaming pro Di Luo, who beats me regularly at PBEM and online war games—so he knows what he's talking about. See you in a few issues! •

RIVERS

YBBOB: o yah, like lenth, width, and heighth, right?

LOBACHEVSKY: Um, didn't you read *On distance-preserving transformations of lines in Euclidean three-space*??? In the "Aequationes Mathematicae" Journal?!

[Piffleface has left the group.]

SCUTTERBUG: yer killin me, man.

[Scutterbug has left the group.]

Frankly, I'm not thrilled with that method. Sad to say, I have to concentrate too darn hard if I want to find the guy at [434, 3,000, -4] on a map grid where [0, 0] isn't even in the middle, 3,000 is the elevation...and negative progression goes from left to right (and it gets even worse if alcohol is involved).

MUCH BETTER...OR IS IT?

Today, in addition to the maps that appear online within seconds of a game's release—along with quest solutions, item lists, skill guides, and item descriptions—we get elaborate pop-up or full-screen maps with detailed terrain, labeled zones and dungeons, and even NPCs highlighted for quick accessibility. You don't need to look at where you are—only where you're going. Think of the wasted art. Now it's:



• Uh, which way is Bree-land, again?

[OOC / COLMUSTERD]: Where's town?

[OOC / QUARKLE]: It's under the "H."

[OOC / COLMUSTERD]: You mean the "H" in "Shire?"

[OOC / QUARKLE]: No, stupid, the "H" in "Foothills."

[OOC / COLMUSTERD]: Does that mean I hafta go alllll the way back to the first "R" in "CrackHore" and cut underneath the "B" in "BileSpew Village"????

[OOC / QUARKLE]: I'm afraid it does....

I guess figuring out things is passé. Players will always find a way to make things easier, and many of the developers seem to go right along. No longer do we think "getting there's half the fun." Has anyone seen my nostalgia calculator? Perhaps it's best left in the land of the lost. In any case, I'd better run—I promised someone I'd meet him just southeast of the second "A" in "Brain-dead." •

UAT GEEK



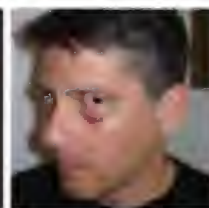
"I've chosen concentration rather than conformity, imagination in place of mainstream social acceptance"



FALLING PIECES

The best in casual games

COLUMN



Robert Coffey

Former CGW editor Robert Coffey now spends his days playing word games and block puzzles. What a life!

+ **Casual gamers, rejoice:** EA's finally released a version of *The Sims* that appeals to moms and 13-year-old girls! Yep—a *Sims* line that nonhardcore gamers can embrace. We haven't seen one of those since, uh, *The Sims 2* was released...and *The Sims* before that. Come to think of it, just what the hell is the point behind the new *Sims: Stories* product line?

Well, one of the most laudable goals of *The Sims: Life Stories* and *The Sims: Pet Stories* was to get the famously resource-hungry game running on laptops and less-muscl'd PCs—which is something these titles accomplish admirably. Getting the games to run in these instances requires some compromises, chiefly in the form of smaller families, tinier neighborhoods, a default windowed mode, and more limited building and item options. If you're dying to play *The Sims* on



• This scene is much less exciting than it looks.

a crappy computer, your prayers are answered with these \$30 products.

Otherwise, don't bother—the story mode is woe-fully underwhelming. Granted, my 12-year-old daughter likes it, but unless *Hannah Montana* is your televised drug of choice, odds are you won't enjoy being led by the nose through these dull, essentially noninteractive adventures. The heavy scripting eliminates surprise and personal involvement—aka *the entire reason you play The Sims*.

You also won't enjoy the bugs. After unlocking the second story in *Life Stories*, I went to the main menu and found that the second story had vanished...along with the free-play option. As much as I love *The Sims*, \$30 is too much to pay for 2.5 hours of thudding disinterest. •



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Things you might hear on the GFW Radio podcast

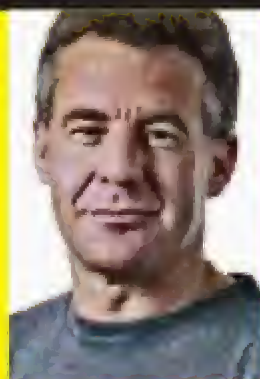
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XTRAS



THE CREW

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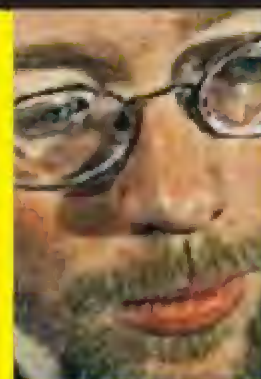
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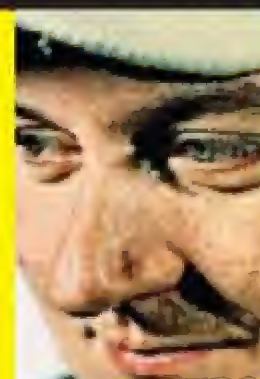
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Editor

+ Every week, the editors of GFW toss aside their inhibitions on *GFW Radio*, a podcast (it's like a magazine, only talked!) dedicated to what we love and loathe in the computer-gaming world. Subscribe at podcasts.1UP.com or the all-powerful iTunes Music Store. Want a sample of the hijinks? Here's a conversation around the office inspired by a recent podcast.

THIS MONTH'S TOPIC: Let's overthink *Penny Arcade Adventures!*

DARREN: Set the wayback machine to May 2006. Interviewing the *Penny Arcade* guys, I asked, "You've made jokes about it, but would you seriously consider making a *Penny Arcade* game?" Cocreator Jerry Holkins said, "Honestly, I think it's kind of a bad idea. I mean, I think, eventually, an idea will fit and we'll decide to take the chance. But I think it's a really big chance, and I don't know how intimate I want to get with game production while I have this commentary position." So I'm gonna open the floor by wondering out loud if Gabe and Tycho are setting themselves up for a lot of trouble. Do you think that commentators should make games while helping sway public opinion? And, for that matter, do you think their comedy will translate into a good game?

SEAN: Setting aside the "when critics turn themselves into the subject of their criticism" quandary for a moment, one potential problem I see here is that RPG battle mechanics are generally terribly unfunny. Even if your attacks have funny names and animations like "Rake in the Face." In fact, RPG battle mechanics are often the very antithesis of funny, as a rake in the face is mildly amusing once, but seriously f***ing unamusing the 900th time, as *The Simpsons* proved long

ago. Maybe they've got that all worked out; I don't know. I hope they do. OK, digression over.

RYAN: It's gonna be awkward once the game comes out. I mean, how are they gonna react if they receive any sort of negative press? It puts them in a weird position—it'd be strange to see them respond directly to that kind of stuff in their usual way.

SHAWN: It's not an enviable situation. Mike Krahulik and Holkins could look like whiny bitches if they cry foul and accuse a reviewer of conflating a grudge against *Penny Arcade* with the *Penny Arcade* game. But they have hurt peoples' feelings, and that can color a critic's opinion. I'm not saying it'll happen, just that it's not impossible.

JEFF: I'm not really worried either way. I think if the game ends up sucking and the press trashes it, the PA guys are likely to agree with us. They'll probably give it a harder time than anyone.

DARREN: I'm not so much concerned about what the gaming press will do as I am about the sticky situation for Krahulik and Holkins. They are opinion-makers making a game. They have a platform to constantly market and push their products. I have a lot of respect for these guys and doubt they'd misuse their power, but why open yourself to the scrutiny? Suddenly, every-



• A curious predicament: What happens when noted game critics become gamemakers?

thing they say can be misinterpreted or considered suspect. The game has to be bulletproof.

SHAWN: The circle is complete.

SEAN: Well, let's try to put ourselves in their shoes for a second. Let's say we made a *GFW Radio* game where, oh, I dunno, you pretty much have no goal when you start, and you go anywhere you want for an hour and then just stop because you run out of time. And it's got minigames where you have to find a bunch of purple eggplants and run from your grandma, who's trying to smack you with a bicycle chain. And the first hour is missing because we forgot to save it. Ah, screw it—let's just say it's a puzzle game with role-playing elements. And GameAwesome.com gave it a 5.37 out of 10.4, a year after they verbally lambasted us on their own podcast for demeaning *Sonic the Hedgehog* fans. What would we say to those f***ers in our podcast? I hope nothing, because I know how much I hate it when a game's creator comes to us and says we reviewed his game wrong. ●

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Global Warming

Games for Windows® outings unite the PC gaming world

It's no secret that PC gaming culture varies from country to country. Post a message on practically any public forum and fans will tell you the following:

- Soccer (aka "football" to our European friends) titles are more popular in the U.K. than those featuring home runs and bone-crunching tackles.
- Hardcore online players practically live out of Internet gaming cafés in South Korea.
- Japanese enthusiasts love anime-styled role-playing epics.
- Here in the U.S., the PC gaming market is dominated by first-person shooters, strategy games, and lifestyle simulations.

But what's not as widely known is that these simple stereotypes fail to truly catalog the breadth and depth of global audiences' overall Games for Windows experience—and how it's helping bring the world closer together.

I've personally frequented many massively multiplayer online role-playing outings into the wee hours and made friends with folks in Australia and Singapore because my late night was their lunchtime. It just goes to show: Even with miles of ocean and vast cultural gulfs between us, we're all just gamers at heart. After all, when playing a game like **Shadowrun™**, whether the guy on your team is Belgian or Burmese doesn't matter, as long as he watches your back.

What's more, international markets are helping to keep several niche genres alive. For example: In Europe, point-and-click adventure titles, once loved in the U.S. but since fallen into decline, are still quite popular. Likewise, one of my friends from India recently told me that their most successful titles are based on cricket.

That being said, the primary difference between global game players is simply public perception of gaming and how it intertwines with their daily lives.

For instance, here in America, it's taken many years to get games off teenagers' desks and into

the family room. However, in Japan, it's practically national policy to have every native adult participate in the hobby. Similarly, in South Korea, gaming tournaments are broadcast on multiple television channels 24 hours a day.

Along similar lines, the number of people playing games in the U.S. has never been higher than it is today, yet multiplayer gaming still takes place largely online. But social experiences based around direct human interaction never went away in Asia. If anything, they've only strengthened with the advent of Internet café-type clubs, where gamers can rent a PC for hours and challenge friends. Ditto for Spain, where residents tend to shun online titles due to limited connectivity and recurring costs. Their solution: embracing more dynamic multiplayer offerings that require the participation of several users in the same room, thereby putting friends and family within direct reach.

In addition, a lot of older PC titles continue to thrive overseas because, unlike American game players, our foreign counterparts don't always upgrade their computers annually. Slower migration means overseas gamers learn to savor each and every title's intricacies longer, creating a healthy culture of fandom and increasing the global audience for computer gaming as a whole.

The kicker is this: Gamers and gaming culture are incredibly diversified around the world. But thanks to the common bond shared through their mutual love of Games for Windows, you'll always be able to find like-minded enthusiasts in any country you happen to visit. True—to really experience the best in foreign gaming, you might have to leave the technically astounding, mouse-mashing first-person shooters and sweeping RTS outings at home. (Not to mention bring an open mind to the table.) Nonetheless, for all their differences, it's obvious PC gamers the world over utilize the Games for Windows brand to define the same thing: pure, unadulterated fun.

 Games for Windows

THE OFFICIAL WORD

United Nations

Games for Windows rebranding efforts go global

Electronic entertainment enthusiasts are already experiencing the thrill of a retail revolution, as the Games for Windows™ brand enjoys unprecedented recognition at thousands of leading electronics and software shops across the U.S. Recognizing that computer gaming is a truly global phenomenon, however, Microsoft is going one step further, offering an equally awe-inspiring experience to shoppers in every hemisphere, as it continues to advance PC players' cause worldwide.

From London to Sydney, Paris to Berlin, fans near and old are lining up by the thousands to learn more about Windows Vista®, DirectX® 10 technology, and the red-hot games they power. And with in-store support from the biggest names in the business, not to mention hundreds of developers and publishers located in every conceivable territory, who could blame them? Bridging borders, spanning age/gender gaps, and crossing cultural divides, the hobby's connectivity is undergoing a new renaissance, fueled by both gamers' and players' passion for this groundbreaking medium.

It just goes to show that Games for Windows isn't merely the wellspring from which the richest, most intense game playing experiences continue to pour—it's a bona fide movement. Small wonder, then, that international audiences are showing their enthusiasm for desktop and mobile gaming as never before, leading your favorite titles, websites, forums, and servers with a wealth of praise and fresh perspective.

Happily, efforts to promote Games for Windows and the Windows Vista platform as a whole continue to draw more attention overseas with each passing day, expanding PC gaming's reach to untold heights. Ensuring, naturally, that the next time you pick up your keyboard and mouse to outfox a devil opponent or duel for control of the known universe, you never know whom you'll encounter. These days, making new friends, improving your social outlook, and exploring the world at large—not to mention opening lines of communication from Prague to Perth—is suddenly as easy as pressing a button.

Want to know what's got the foreign community in such an uproar? The following are just a few of the many promotional campaigns going on across the globe that are helping to make Games for Windows a household name—and in several languages, at that:

AUSTRALIA/NEW ZEALAND

As in America, key retailers are setting out special shopping areas devoted specifically to Games for Windows titles so that fans will always know where to find the latest and greatest digital diversions. Free game samples are also being offered, letting enthusiasts Down Under go hands-on with plenty of the same great outings we Americans enjoy. The goal: educating buyers about the many amazing upgrades of Games for Windows and giving them the chance to see firsthand just why critics are raving. Sales clerks and other personnel are also receiving special training to help customers make more informed decisions and discover new and exciting games like **Medal of Honor™** and **Zoo Tycoon® 2: Extinct Animals**. "With the rollout of Games for Windows branding into key retail partners, we're making it even easier for consumers to select the games they want," says group marketing manager Nick Segger.

CANADA

Our friends in the Great White North (ummm? Maximize usability so as to more effectively bring awesome offerings like **The Lord of the Rings™ Online**, **Shadow of Angmar™**, and **Crysis™** to buyers' attention. With the support of local retailers, over 300 stores now sport a modular, dedicated Games for



Windows section that's ready to expand as more great titles hit the shelves. Not only do these placements help improve awareness among newcomers as well as longtime PC gaming fans, they're also doing wonders in terms of turning people on to the pastime. Added bonus: Should they decide that they're ready to dive straight into gaming's future, shoppers can also pick up a copy of Windows Vista right then and there, on the spot. "We're giving gamers the best of the best in one location," explains Ryan Bidan, product manager, Games. "They get the best games and the best gaming OS Microsoft has ever produced."

FRANCE

Following tremendous success with a campaign at its La Défense district, Paris outlet, a huge rollout is underway at Toys "R" Us stores throughout the country that'll vault Games for Windows titles to even greater acclaim. This venture won't just increase the size of total PC game shelf space throughout the retailer by a whopping 50 percent—it'll also provide educational materials so that everyone can learn more about the brand as well as featured blockbusters, and computer users may be made more aware of the many great gaming options available to them. A massive road show is also underway to promote **Shadowrun™**, including in-store demo days at various retailers, online outreach efforts, and a guest appearance at the World Cyber Games. "We're working closely with key partners such as Toys "R" Us, Auchan, and Darty to increase brand visibility," confirms category manager Games for Windows/LIVE David Vibert. "This is just the beginning of a beautiful story."

GERMANY

Appropriately, one of Europe's largest gaming markets is thinking big when it comes to new Games for Windows retail ventures. In addition to a branded presence at multiple chains and dozens of stores throughout the territory, significant effort is also being placed into online promotional efforts. Meaning that German hobbyists won't just find important details on and copies of great games like **Lara Croft Tomb Raider: Anniversary** or **Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs™** at their favorite local shop...they'll additionally be able to browse dedicated Games for Windows webpages, shop at Amazon.com for new titles online, and find links directing them to more information at every turn. It's all part of a new, holistic strategy, designed to "increase brand awareness of Games for Windows and Windows Vista at stores and provide consumers all possible information

about the new gaming experience they provide," channel marketing manager Inge Echter elaborates.

UNITED KINGDOM

Domestic efforts in the U.K. to promote Games for Windows-stamped products are as ambitious as they are far-reaching. Think dedicated branding at popular chains Virgin, HMV, and ASDA, with PC World stores also featuring dedicated shopping sections and rolling game demos passersby can stop and gawk at. Online sponsorships will also help introduce players to the wonders of DirectX 10-powered titles and Windows Vista-exclusive, next-generation outings like **Halo® 2**. "U.K. retailers have embraced Games for Windows' potential as a revolutionary gaming platform," says channel marketing manager Pawan Bhardwaj. "Excited as gamers are, though, partners aren't resting on their laurels: Even more awesome announcements are on the way." As any visit to the British Isles' most popular gathering spots quickly confirms, this is *the* year to be a PC gamer.





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Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his own brow? Must his brilliance be shared to help the poor—his art censored to shield the weak? Reject these petty constraints of the world you know, and choose to embrace what others deem impossible. Choose Rapture, where your potential is limitless.

Ryan Industries has created specialized Plasmids that break all of the boundaries established by the world above that keep people small, afraid, and ignorant. With just one injection, a Plasmid can genetically modify your DNA to make you what you once only dreamt of becoming. Why be able to modify your car or upgrade your house, but not your body? Why buy and build things to protect, defend, and attack, instead of looking inside at the marvel that is the human form? Perfect yourself, not something else. Be stronger, faster, smarter—there is no limit to what you can become.

With just one dose of Incinerate, Prometheus' fire is in the palm of your hand, and a snap of your fingertips will send it anywhere you wish. Burn the bridges you see before you and build up a new society. Strike down your enemies in a flash of fire.

Open your mind and realize the true power of human potential, where the size of one's muscles no longer decides who is strong or feeble. Lift boulders that Atlas would shrink at the sight of. Whether you wish to strike down an enemy or shield yourself from danger, you can now do so without lifting a finger. Telekinesis brings the weak to their knees.

Keep enemies away with Electric Flesh, a Combat Tonic that insulates your body in a shield of electricity. And even the most complicated inventions can be remade for your use with a treatment of our Engineering Tonics. With the HackSmart line,

you can become an expert with vending machines or alarms... even the most complex security systems. Disable or rewire them to work for your purposes with-

out wasting time studying useless information petty people from the world above would spend hours agonizing over.

Freeze your foes where they stand. Do not be constrained by conventional combat; just one flick of your wrist, and Winter Blast encases your enemies in ice. You control the outcome: Let them thaw, or learn the rewards of revenge by bludgeoning them into a thousand pieces with a satisfying smack to the skull.

Control those who once wished to be your puppet master with Enrage, and pull their strings to make your dreams a reality. Crush those who stand in your way with an army whose anger will stomp out all opposition. Blast through any barriers with a smashing blow from another's fist.

Beauty is no longer controlled by outside forces or blessed at birth either, but now dictated by your own imagination. Petty morality does not hold us back any longer. If you can dream it, you can achieve it, create it—and become it.

Join Rapture, and evolve today.

—Elizabeth Tobey, www.cultofrapture.com



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Sexual Themes
Strong Language

Got Game?

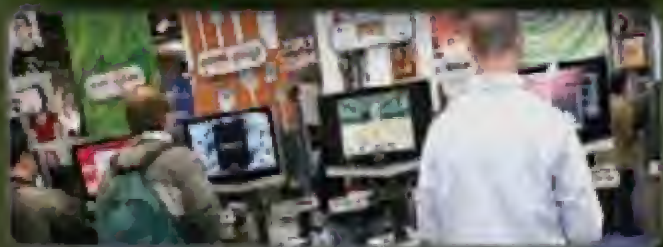
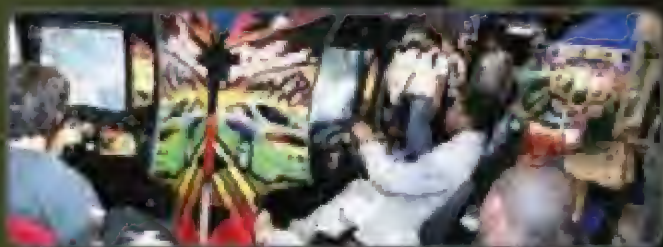
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Tech

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A DO-IT-YOURSELFER'S DIARY

 "Video engine failed to initialize." Well, that does it...it's time for me to get a new computer. It was inevitable, after all. What with constantly evolving technology, the average life span of a computer gets shorter and shorter. Sinking time exclusively into *World of Warcraft* cuts you some performance slack, but standing still just isn't an option when you're eyeballing the latest and greatest games. Playing doctor and transplanting newer parts—more memory, new processors, and so on—prolongs a machine's life span, but even that only gets you so far. Some day, when all your performance sliders sit at their lowest setting, you just need to pull the plug and start from scratch. That's exactly what I decided to do.

I'm going into this a little blind—when I'm not looking to upgrade, I generally don't follow the exploits of the latest wet-my-pants-they're-so-fast videocards and CPUs. (That's what happens when you spend weeks in high-level dungeon raids.) If there's any hope of playing games like *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*—let alone *Crysis* or *Fallout 3*—I've got my work cut out for me. I need to research the right parts, stay within my \$1,600 budget, and most importantly, build this sucker to be future-proof. OK, as future-proof as possible when it comes to PCs. I'm not a build-a-new-computer-every-six-months kind of gal—I'm looking for a commitment! • Alice Liang

[Alice Liang is an intern for 1UP.com. When her PC blew up, we invited her to share with GFW readers her experience building a new PC.—Ed.]



THIS OLD PC

Build your own great gaming rig from scratch



98

REVIEW

The Two Towers

Two \$4,000 desktops showed up in the office on the same day. How do they compare?



COLUMN

Gladstoned

Darren barely recovers from an unpleasant trip to the local video-game store.

RESEARCH

A computer's value isn't just the sum of its parts—it's how those pieces work together. Before building, it's best to get acquainted with what's going into the pot. And even though I'm sticking with Windows XP for now, I need to think ahead for DirectX 10.

Motherboard: A good foundation is the secret to success...or the source of annoying problems down the line if ignored up front. No one wants a building to come crashing down around their ears because the contractor decided to build it on top of a flimsy base. This applies to PCs as well, so why skimp? The Gigabyte GA-P35C-DSR3 isn't exactly cheap, but it isn't crazy expensive either. With solid performance, a P35 chipset, and support for DDR2 (up to 8GB)

and DDR3 (up to 4GB) system memory as well as Intel's upcoming 45nm processors, this board won't be obsolete by the time it's installed. It has three PCI slots—more than enough to suit my needs—and onboard HD audio. It doesn't have a FireWire port, but I won't miss that.

CPU: The brains of the operation. It doesn't matter how solid the rest of the lineup is if you've got a slow processor mucking things up. I've been partial to AMD chips in the past, but Intel has been shaking things up with its Core 2 line, and competitive pricing just makes Intel even more attractive. The new E6750 is nearly identical to the E6700 (2.66GHz and 4MB L2 cache) but comes with a 1.33GHz FSB instead of 1.066GHz. Sure, I could probably over-

clock a 6600 to match this, but for no-hassle stock speeds, the 6750 is a great deal at two C-notes (in June, just a month before I purchased this, the 6700 cost over \$300). If I ever want to give overclocking a shot, it's got plenty of headroom, even without raising the core voltage. Another bonus of the E6750: It matches DDR3-1333 RAM at a 1-to-1 ratio.

Videocard: If a CPU's the brain, the GPU flexes 3D brawn. And the EVGA e-GeForce 8800 GTX is about as strong as they come. It's the priciest part in this whole rig, by far, but with 768MB of video RAM (VRAM), this first-generation DirectX 10 card has the muscle to back up its premium price and last me through my eventual transition to Vista. Be warned, though—this card is *long* and has trouble squeezing into compact cases. Why EVGA? It's a consistently trusted brand that backs up its cards with a lifetime warranty, 24/7 toll-free tech support, and well-monitored forums. When you're plopping down \$500 for one part, a little assurance goes a long way.

Case: It seems that everything manufactured today is space-age when all I want is classy—flashing LEDs, clear window sides, spinning rims, or whatever else people pimp their cases with nowadays need not apply. Fortunately, Antec's P182 delivers a sturdy, sleek-looking home for parts, complete with exterior case-fan speed controls, separate PSU and hard drive compartments (at the bottom), and plenty of room to run cables behind the back panel. For an awesome bonus, the P182 has washable, removable dust filters in the front. A clean rig is a cool rig.

Power Supply: SeaSonic makes efficient but silent power supplies, and it's hard not to fall in love with the M12's understated, subtle charm. As someone who can't be bothered to tidy up my cables, the modular design is especially welcome—anything to minimize clutter and increase airflow. Is it ridiculous to spend more on a PSU than the CPU? Past experience with cheap, unreliable supplies says no.

RAM: What, no DDR3? Frankly, it's still too price prohibitive, and DDR2 currently offers a better balance between bandwidth and latency (the amount of time between when your CPU requests data from your RAM and when it arrives). These two sticks of Corsair XMS2 PC2-6400 memory are affordable, easily obtainable, have aggressive timings—and are compatible with my motherboard.

Hard Drive: Seagate can name a storage device after a large fang-toothed fish—I don't care. But running quietly and fast (at 7,200 rpm), the Barracuda is a great choice. As an added bonus, this perpendicular recording drive gives you massive storage without generating a lot of heat.

Optical Drive: Personal experience makes the choice for me: Lite-On. This brand manages to stay cheap and reliable. And considering the luxuries I've taken elsewhere, the low price is certainly welcome. >



• "Where's the magic 'work now' button?"

THE SHOPPING LIST

What you'll need to succeed

CPU:	Intel Core 2 Duo E6750	\$210
MOTHERBOARD:	Gigabyte GA-P35C-D53R	\$160
VIDEOCARD:	EVGA e-GeForce 8800 GTX 768MB	\$536
RAM:	2MB Corsair XMS2 PC2-6400	\$113
CASE:	Antec P182	\$170
PSU:	SeaSonic M12-700	\$210
HARD DRIVE:	320GB Seagate Barracuda 7200.10	\$80
DRIVE:	Lite-On SH-16A75 SATA DVD±RW burner	\$37
TOTAL:		\$1,516*

*PRICES FROM NEWEGG.COM, JULY 2007

HARD CORES

If you plan on doing a lot of video or CG work, you probably want to consider a quad-core processor. Thanks to Intel's price drop in July, they are more affordable than ever, with the Q6600 sitting under \$300. In terms of gaming, few titles now available take advantage of all four cores, and you'll see a bigger performance increase from a faster clocked dual-core. Games that use all four cores are definitely coming—with *Supreme Commander* out and *Crysis* to follow—so it isn't really a matter of "if," but "when."



PLAN B: Need more cores? Check out Intel's 2.4GHz Core 2 Quad Q6600. (\$266, www.intel.com)

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

Audiophiles everywhere may have noticed that this build has no dedicated soundcard. The reasoning behind this has to do with options—sounds contradictory, I know, but if you plan to migrate from XP to Vista any time in the near future, I'd hold off on committing to a card just yet. Creative's X-Fi cards are stand-up performers in XP, but they've still got some driver kinks in Vista. Besides, the onboard sound is perfectly acceptable while you wait for the dust to settle.



PLAN B: Can't wait? Creative's X-Fi XtremeGamer should do the trick. (\$100, www.creative.com)

TO SLI, OR NOT TO SLI

Or CrossFire, for that matter. You can buy two high-end graphics cards for hardcore performance or match two lower-end cards to a high-end card's speed (for hopefully less money). You can even just buy one high-end card now and wait for prices to drop down the line before you buy a second, giving yourself a nice upgrade. Any route is viable, and it all boils down to preference: How much power do you need to reach the performance you want now, and how do you plan on upgrading in the future?



PLAN B: Decide SLI's the ticket? Give the EVGA nForce 680i SLI 775 T1 motherboard a look. You'll thank us later. (\$230, www.evga.com)





• Of course, you can always just take the lazy way out and order a PC online.

DELL BUILDS IT FOR YOU

Is all this DIY trouble actually worth it? I mean, why build your own if Dell can do it for you? Well, here's a list of comparable parts in a customized XPS 710 Black. A few things to consider: You can't choose what brands go into your box, the RAM frequency is slower, and the CPU's FSB is lower, but it comes with a dedicated soundcard. It also costs a heck of a lot more than our build, but Dell gives you one year of in-home service (and more if you pay for it) and tech support, and you don't have to do any of the back-breaking work yourself. Translation: Being lazy has its price.

XPS 710 BLACK

CPU:	Intel Core 2 Duo E6700
MOTHERBOARD:	Dell BTX board
GPU:	768MB Nvidia GeForce 8800 GTX
RAM:	2GB DDR2 667MHz
CASE:	Leaning XPS 710 Metal Case
PSU:	750W
SOUND:	Creative Labs Sound Blaster X-Fi XtremeMusic
HARD DRIVE:	320GB SATA 7,200 rpm
OPTICAL DRIVE:	16x CD/DVD double-layer burner

TOTAL: \$2,399

NOTE: PRICE INCLUDES ONE YEAR IN-HOME SERVICE PARTS PLUS LABOR

THE BUILDING PROCESS

The research takes more than a few hours, but waiting for components to arrive in the mail feels like *forever*. Finally, with various parts spread across my desk like it's some sort of private assembly line, the *real* work is about to begin.

First, I crack open the case. The thick but light side panels slide smoothly off the case, and I set them somewhere out of the way. A large part of why people agonize over building their own computers stems from that first look into the empty case. ("I've gotta put all *this* in *that*?!") It's a fumbling feeling that brings out the awkward teenager in us all. Luckily, it's like remembering how to ride a bike: wobbly at first, but steady as she goes.

And most of the parts fit as expected, but the case adds a twist to the otherwise traditional installation of some components. A removable metal cage fits over the power supply—it's a little bit of a tight squeeze—and screws into the base of the case, leaving little room

between the PSU and the compartment's fan; it's not a problem so long as you first remember (unlike me) to plug in a SATA cable. It's nothing a little finger acrobatics and a hand cramp can't fix, but it does make you wish the compartment could slide out like the drive bays. The hard drive sits vertically in its bay, secured with vibration-cutting rubber grommets, and the optical drive snaps in thanks to easily attachable metal clips—what a breeze compared to screw-in drives. Removing the middle drive bays gives you more room for the giant videocard, but that's easy.

The tough part is running all the cables. Aside from just looking better, tidy cable management improves airflow in the case. But I've never been particularly adept at this. You should see the spaghetti-like wired mess behind my home theater! Though the P182 has a nice channel in the back to hide cables, with several holes to access the motherboard, I still end up with a loose cluster clumping up in the middle of the drive bay. It's no big deal, and the only cable that needs to stretch across the motherboard is the front panel audio connector.

With everything connected, I press power and...blank screen. Great. Subscribing to the put-it-all-in-and-pray-it-posts school of thought comes back to bite me in the butt. But, as long as each part is handled and connected with care, installations are generally trouble-free—that is, unless the components are defective. Then it becomes a "find the faulty hardware" trial-and-error session of epic proportions. Tip: Check the RAM first. I take the second stick out and try again. It posts, but this isn't the end. I swap out the sticks, and a second failed post tells me I have one bad DIMM. Well, the PC still runs with one stick, and the other can be put in after it's replaced with a working module. At least it wasn't something *serious*.

BY THE NUMBERS

Game	Game Resolution	Frames Per Second	FSAA / AF
F.E.A.R.	1600 x 1200	143	4x / 16x
	2560 x 1600	85	4x / 16x
Half-Life 2	1600 x 1200	139	2x / 16x
	2560 x 1600	125	2x / 16x
Prey	1600 x 1200	99	4x / 16x
	2560 x 1600	56	4x / 16x
Supreme Commander	1600 x 1200	37	4x / 8x
	2560 x 1600	25	4x / 8x

*Tests run in Windows XP

THE PAYOFF



While assembly took longer than anticipated (isn't that always the case?), this build went better than some—and not a single drop of blood was shed. Let's chalk this up as a "win."

As expected, this PC is a beast. It aces all the benchmarks, and surprisingly (even though I hunted for "silent" parts, it wasn't my intention to build a "silent PC"), the hum of the computer is barely audible. The noisiest part is the optical drive when it's reading a disc, but that's a given.

Building a PC is a personal experience and the amount of research put into the parts you choose is definitely important—but when the day is done, does it put a smile on your face, and was the money well spent? Was it worth all the obsessive specification comparisons, bargain hunting, and back pain? These are the parts I went with, based on my own personal needs and preferences. If there's a brand you feel secure with, go with that. When you're dropping a huge chunk of change, nobody wants to feel buyer's remorse. •

REVIEW

Hypersonic's AMD muscle machine, the Cyclone OCX. Vigor Gaming's Intel/Nvidia-based Force Recon QXN. Two intimidating desktops with almost nothing in common. Well, maybe a *little* in common. Both promise Vista-gaming nirvana. Both will set you back about four grand. Both arrived

at the GFW offices on the same day. Scientific method or sheer coincidence? You decide. Point is, if you have \$4,000 in the bank, what are you gonna spend it on? Unlike Alice's mission to build an XP PC on the cheap, let's see how a couple high-end, build-to-order manufacturers fare when money is no object.

THE AMD DIFFERENCE

First up is the slightly less expensive Cyclone OCX from Hypersonic. What's inside: an admirable AMD CPU and two 512MB ATI Radeon HD 2900 XT graphics cards working in CrossFire. Holding it all together is the Thunderbolt II aluminum case, which is sturdy and functional but hardly sexy. Sorry, but the stickered-on lettering doesn't exactly scream "I just dropped four Gs on this thing!"—it's as classy as stenciling a company name on the side of a two-toned luxury Town Car. Where it wins points is under the hood. We expect neat cabling, sure, but the layout easily accommodates oversized cards. The smart, unobtrusive motherboard placement gives plenty of clearance for inevitable upgrades. So, if you ever tire of CrossFire (or, god forbid, larger cards appear), this case can contain them and won't make you go mental during installation.

• Beaming blue lighting when powered up, the Force Recon QXN is anything but subtle.



HARDWARE SPECS

HYPERSONIC CYCLONE OCX

URL: www.hypersonic-pc.com

CASE: Thunderbolt II

CPU: AMD Athlon 64 X2 6000+ Dual Core AM2 Processor

COOLER: Arctic Cooling Freezer 64 Pro Ultra Quiet CPU Cooler

RAM: 2GB Mushkin eXtreme XP2-6400 DDR2-800

VIDEOCARD: Dual ATI Radeon HD 2900 XT PCI-Express (2x 512MB) in CrossFire

HARD DRIVE: Dual 150GB 10,000-rpm Western Digital Raptor in RAID-0 (for OS); 250GB 7,200-rpm Seagate (for storage)

OTHER DRIVES: Plextor 18x DVD±RW Dual Layer IDE Drive, Combo 9-in-1 Floppy Drive + Digital Media Reader/Writer

PSU: Enermax Galaxy DXX EGX1000EWL 1,000W power supply

OS: Windows Vista Ultimate, 32-bit

WARRANTY: 1 Year, 24/7 toll-free support, Hypersonic Disaster Recovery DVD

PRICE: \$3,927

VIGOR FORCE RECON QXN

URL: www.vigorgaming.com

CASE: Force with Tornado Air Ventilation System

CPU: Intel Extreme Quad QX6800 (overclocked)

COOLER: Vigor Monsoon II

RAM: 2GB Corsair TWIN2X2048-8500CS DDR2

VIDEOCARD: Dual Nvidia GeForce 8800 Ultra

(2x 768MB RAM) in SLI

HARD DRIVE: Dual 150GB 10,000-rpm Western Digital Raptor in RAID-0; 500GB 7,200-rpm Western Digital

OTHER DRIVES: 18x SATA DVD±RW with LightScribe

PSU: Tagan TG1100-U96 TurboJet 1,100W

power supply

OS: Windows Vista Home, 32-bit

WARRANTY: Three-year parts warranty and lifetime

labor and tech support

PRICE: \$4,299

THE TWO

Power-hungry PCs vie for the coveted title of "my precioussss"

The machine runs cool and quiet without water-cooling or obnoxiously oversized fans, and the Silencer Package keeps fan noise to a whisper. Even with the lid off, the machine maintained a supernatural hush while churning through tests.

INTEL/NVIDIA'S ONE-TWO PUNCH

On the other hand, you know when someone powers up a Force Recon QXN. This rig is about as subtle as an F-16 double-parked in your living room. From the candy-blue custom paint job and blue LED lighting to the huge hot-rod blower of a CPU fan inside, Vigor's PC gets your attention.

In fact, comparing the Force Recon to some kind of military-grade gear isn't very far-fetched—this blue bomber is heavy as a tank. The front panel's LED display gives status updates on your PC (on everything from temperature to hard drive activity) while providing easy access to USB, FireWire, and headphone ports. The only real downer is the case layout under the hood. Everything save the power supply gets jammed toward the bottom of the case—the motherboard, the graphics cards, the hard drive cage. The cabling is neatly tucked out of the way and components fit as planned, but we don't want to imagine what happens when the Nvidia 10,800,000 MegaUltraLudicrous (1 terabyte version, of course) or next monster graphics card ships. Speaking of huge, that CPU fan can get a little loud if you crank the front-mounted dial. It's nothing that'll drown out the digitized screams of fallen foes, but it's enough to notice.

Fortunately, the Force Recon QXN chooses to put up rather than shut up. Rumbling with an Intel quad-core CPU and dual 768MB Nvidia GeForce 8800 Ultra cards, it chews through most benchmarks—as you can see from the numbers camping just below in the chart.

APPLES AND ORANGES

Go on, check the charts for a sec. Notice how the Force Recon wins by a wide margin? Even if Hypersonic had opted to overclock its machine (both companies offer free overclocking), that minute speed boost still wouldn't cover the gap. After all, as good as the Radeon 2900 XT 3D option may be for the price, these graphics cards compete with lower-powered Nvidia GeForce 8800 GTS boards, not the monstrous 8800 Ultras onboard the Force Recon. Then there are the AMD CPUs of late, which, while affordable, get wheezy keeping pace with Intel.

What's surprising is that both these machines cost close to \$4,000. Hey, I don't think it's fair to compare these two computers with two very different chipsets, either. However, when a couple hundred bucks separate them, it's time to ask yourself which one you think is worth the money. I'm sure Hypersonic's choice of Vista Ultimate added a little more to the price, but still. Wow.

If pressed, I'd consider Vigor's Force Recon QXN. Yes, it may cost \$374 more, but it delivers on the gaming-nirvana promise. Another usually overlooked X factor that further swings my vote is a tastier warranty. Vigor provides three years of parts coverage and lifetime technical support for the package highlighted here. Hypersonic offers up one year's worth of 24/7 service, along with a recovery disc. Don't know about you, but considering how much I monkey around with upgrades, I'd take all the help I can get.

• Darren Gladstone



BY THE NUMBERS

Game	Game Resolution	Force Recon (frames per second)	Cyclone (frames per second)
Company of Heroes (DX10)**	1600 x 1200	38	24
F.E.A.R.	1600 x 1200	183	109
	2560 x 1600	99	60
Half-Life 2	1600 x 1200	165	115
	2560 x 1600	139	105
Prey	1600 x 1200	90	70
	2560 x 1600	58	59
Supreme Commander	1600 x 1200	42	30
	2560 x 1600	33	19
W.E.I.* Score		5.4	5.4

NOTE: All tests run at 16xAF, 4xFSA, except *Supreme Commander* (8xAF, 4xFSA)
 *W.E.I. SCORE NOTE: Notice that both machines rank a 5.4, and yet the benchmarks tell another story. So much for making hardware spec-finding easier....
 **DX10 numbers are broken out separately with good reason: Being this early in the new API's life cycle, we're coming across all sorts of scoring anomalies. Some games work better with ATI cards, others with Nvidia. In addition, both sides of the GPU-manufacturing fence continue to cry foul about scores in DX10.

PRODUCT: Cyclone OCX MANUFACTURER: Hypersonic PRICE: \$3,927

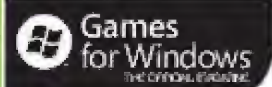


VERDICT

- + Good game performance, runs quietly, and has plenty of room inside.
- A little on the pricey side for the performance.

7/10

GOOD



PRODUCT: Force Recon QXN MANUFACTURER: Vigor Gaming PRICE: \$4,299

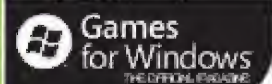


VERDICT

- + Good price for solid benchmark scores.
- Like a New York City studio apartment, it's a little cramped inside.

8/10

GOOD



TOWERS



GLADSTONED

Always! Be! Closing!



DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION

Sick of dealing with in-store idiocy? I go online for mine! Here are some options:

GAMETAP.COM It's half game service, half TV network. Considering it's now got a limited free model, it's definitely worth checking out.

MANIFESTOGAMES.COM Johnny Wilson's manifesto: Provide a place to try and buy indie-developed games.

STEAM The source for *Half-Life 2* is also a haven for games from Capcom, Eidos, Midway Games, Sega, THQ—and a couple indie gamemakers.



COLUMN



Darren Gladstone

Would you like to buy a lifetime warranty for this issue? E-mail darren.gladstone@ziffdavis.com for details!

Game Specialty Store Clerk: Hi, and welcome to Glengarry Glen Ross Games. Are you here to reserve a copy of *Madden 2009: NFL Armageddon—Extra Crispy Edition*?

Me: Umm, hi. No, but I would like to buy *BioShock*, though.

Clerk: PC or 360 version?

Me: PC, of course.

Clerk: Sorry, sold out.

Me: Alright, the 360 version, then.

Clerk: Did you preorder it?

Me: No....

Clerk: Sorry, we only have enough for people who knew the secret handshake in 2006.

Me: But I'm looking at a stack of 20. It's. Right. Behind. You.

Clerk: I'm sorry, if you didn't preorder it, we can't give you one.

Me: Didn't you guys think that more than 20 people might want the game?

Clerk: Look, I am sorry, but those are for....

Me: ...people with the preorder handshake. I get it. OK...how's about...uhhh...*Two Worlds*?

Clerk: Did you preorder it five months ago?

Me: Ohforthelovea...! I didn't know it'd be any good five months ago! Fine. What do you have?

Clerk: Well, I think a *Nancy Drew* game just came in this morning....

Me: Great! I'll take one!

Clerk: Regular, Special, Director's Cut, Legendary, Avocado, or Zesty Ranch Edition?

Me: Regular, please.

Clerk: Would you like to buy the strategy guide? It's only \$10 more.

Me: No thank you.

Clerk: Would you like to join our membership program?

Me: No thanks.

Clerk: Are you sure? It comes with this awesome magazine....

Me: No!

Clerk: Insurance in case your game breaks?

Me: Nope.

Clerk: A disc head cleaner?

Me: No.

Clerk: Some monitor wipes, maybe? I can sell you a pack of three—and it's only \$10!

Me: Please, God, smite this store.

Clerk: Would you like to preorder anything today? Like *Grand Theft...*

Me: STOPIT! STOPIT! STOPIT!

Sales clerk? I need you to listen to me very carefully before I vomit blood from my ears. Take this magazine, roll it up nice and tight, and walk to the back of the store. Go over to your manager. Now beat him with it. Go on. It's cool. The customer is always right, after all.

Look, it's not the clerk's fault. He's the one stuck staffing the front lines—it's his bosses I want to jam ear-deep in murky toilet water. They're the ones giving directives to push junk

we don't want or need. There's a poster in the back of the store, pressuring employees. "Always be closing!" Thank you, you motherless jackals, for turning my game-buying experience into shopping for a used car.

I once relied upon these game-store gurus. These computer-gaming comrades would steer me away from crap and maybe turn me on to some obscure title I'd never heard of—or even give me tips. Instead, all I get now is a constant sales pitch from the moment I walk through the door. Instead of seeking advice, I now wanna shout, "Just take my money and shut the hell up!"

These days I get fewer headaches by steering clear altogether. People like me who once relied upon specialty shops now grab games at places like Best Buy, Target, and Costco—and not because the prices are that much better. It's because we get one less hassle. The salespeople at these nonspecialty stores may know nothing about the games, but here's what they do know: that they have the damn games on the damn store shelves. And they *usually* don't try to obnoxiously push stuff on me.

Am I overreacting? You don't see this crap at bookstores. Is *Harry Potter* in stock? You bet your ass! The staff doesn't badger you with 20 books to preorder. They gladly answer questions, give suggestions, and call other stores if they don't have something in stock. Nobody's browbeating me into buying the dog-eared, drooled-up version from the used book section.

And no matter how desperate a bookseller may be, nobody has the stones to try selling novel insurance. And God help the guy who asks me. ●

IF THE GOVERNMENT HAS ITS WAY, YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO PLAY HALF THE GAMES IN THIS MAGAZINE.

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Or: Don't let 'em take me to the Cadillac Ranch

COLUMN



Jeff Green

Back when Jeff was a kid, you started your car by running along with your bare feet. Say "hi" to editor Flintstone at jeff_green@ziffdavis.com.

Warning Watching the extraordinarily disastrous launch of *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes* was like watching a fat guy do

a belly flop off a high diving board. You know in advance it's going to be painful and ugly, you want to yell at him to stop, he does it anyway—and it is, in fact, as painful and ugly as you predicted. *Vanguard* was a preordained flop. Most of us saw it coming. But enough Kool-Aid was distributed during its development to apparently convince plenty of folks (including many in the press) that what gamers really want is an ugly and numbingly generic fantasy world with deliberately hard play mechanics. Why have a good time when you can suffer like the hardcore guy you are? Fun is for babies!

I'm not gleeful. It's horrible, really, to think about the thousands of hours that go into projects like this, the talent and effort of the many people involved, the money spent—and the payoff being nothing more than a sackful of bad reviews, an indifferent public, and a humiliating server merge just six months after launch. If that were my game, I'd probably be curled up in a corner now in a fetal position, sucking my thumb and asking for my mommy. I mean, more than I normally do.

On the bright side, *Vanguard* is still running. So that means there's still hope. With some TLC (OK, and maybe an entire redesign), it could still get better and be worthy of attracting new players. (Note to self: Resist the "and pigs may fly out of my butt" joke.) Sadly, the same cannot be said for poor *Auto Assault*, which, sometime around the time you're reading this (on August 31), is being shut down for good, the players turning in their digital car keys forever and hitching rides back home, suckered victims of yet another failed MMORPG.

The sad thing about *Auto Assault* is that, unlike most massively multiplayer games, it was at least trying to do something different. And for the most part, the press (including this magazine) was kind to the game, perhaps extending more goodwill than it realistically deserved, if only because everyone wanted it to be good—the idea of a massive multiplayer auto-combat game being an indisputably great one to all but the most hopelessly anachronistic of Ren-faire, elf-loving gamers.

In fact, it was partially the fear of losing that crowd, I believe, that ultimately doomed *Auto Assault*. The game had plenty of problems, to be sure. The system requirements (as in *Vanguard*) were a bitch, especially considering that the graphics (as in *Vanguard*) were a tad on the fugly side. And the low server population was a persistent chicken-and-egg problem: When you're paying a monthly fee primarily so you can play with other gamers, you don't want to feel like you're on a solo road trip in the middle of the Sahara Desert after a nuclear holocaust at 3 a.m., hoping against hope that someone, anyone, might drive by.

But in my mind the biggest problem was that the game didn't just go for it. It wussed out and was not the auto-combat game everyone knew and hoped it could be. I am not the first person to note this (though certainly one of the more attractive), but *Auto Assault* was really no more than *EverQuest* or *World of Warcraft* with car skins. Player classes, though given vaguely mechanical/car-like names like "Terminators" and "Constructors," boiled down to the same damn "tank, healer, hunter, rogue" thing we've already done for forever



now. Combat, though on the surface a bit more "action oriented," and with some somewhat cool semidestructible environments, ultimately revealed itself to be really not much more exciting or interesting than ye olde fantasy-RPG combat.

Oh, the betrayal! What we needed was not a four-wheeled, vehicular version of a dwarf warrior, but an online version of a classic auto-combat game like *Interstate '76*, where driving and shooting skills actually mattered, and where players could obsess over customizing their cars in a way that had real, visceral results in the game.

The saddest part of this very sad tale is the total shutdown. Quite often, less-than-successful or older, past-their-prime MMOs manage to sustain themselves with small but stubbornly loyal fan bases who happily play on, oblivious to or unconcerned with the fact that the rest of the world has moved on, like whoever the 50 people are (besides my mom) who still watch *ER*. Heck, even freakin' *Meridian 59*, about as old a dinosaur as you can get in this genre (and the game commonly credited for having begat the term "massively multiplayer"), still has a small, active online community, which is kind of like discovering that there are Neanderthals still living in New York City.

But, alas, such is not to be the fate of *Auto Assault*. No, on August 31, 2007, *Auto Assault* is going out like Thelma and Louise, sailing off that cliff forever, soaring into the great beyond, before falling, falling, and finally crashing next to those other rusted online wrecks—*Asheron's Call 2*, *Earth and Beyond*, *Motor City Online*, and many others—that lost control or flamed out or just plain ran out of gas.

We rev our engines one last time in salute. ●

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN TAYLOR



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